

Health warnings as an integral part of health communication

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ABSTRACT

Background

There is evidence from high income countries, and growing evidence from low –and middle-income countries, of the efficacy of pictorial warnings to build risk perceptions of the health effects of tobacco, with users and the general public. As well as being a highly cost-effective policy initiative in resource constrained settings, indications are that pictorial warnings, which depict graphic imagery of diseased body parts or evoke disgust, may be the most effective in supporting behavioural changes. Hard-hitting mass media campaigns, using messages synergized with pack warning implementation, may provide optimal behavioural outcomes. Qualitative and quantitative findings from Bangladesh are explored to identify the potential added impact of synergised communication to support pictorial warnings.

Methods

Four TV announcements were developed using patient testimonials exhibiting similar conditions to those depicted on pictorial warning depictions – lung, oral and throat cancers; and childhood asthma. The announcements were pre-tested with tobacco user focus groups in urban and rural locations of Bangladesh using a standardised set of indicators. Following pictorial warnings implementation, a national four week mass media campaign was conducted to support the policy initiative followed by an outcome evaluation. Multivariate logistic regression analyses was conducted with “campaign aware” and “campaign unaware” groups to identify how campaign messages rated against indicators of acceptance, perceived personalised effectiveness, discomfort, likelihood of discussing the warnings, and tobacco cessation related behaviours.

Results

Qualitative findings identified that all four testimonials rated highly against best practice indicators with both urban and rural audiences. The most graphic oral cancer testimonial scored the highest overall rating, against the 13 indicators of effectiveness. Campaign outcome evaluation findings showed significant differences in behavioural indicators by campaign aware and unaware groups with findings showing higher agreement with sentiments related to personal risk perceptions of tobacco related diseases, improved self-efficacy perceptions, and cessation related behaviours.

Conclusions

Pictorial warnings are an important policy initiative which should be stepped up in LMIC settings. Indications are that hard hitting communication campaigns which support pictorial warnings implementation can provide synergies to increase traction of this important policy initiative as well as increase dialogue, and promote cessation attempts.