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SPEAKER'S CORNER

Public health practitioners can learn from the weather forecasters

In Canada there is a Weather Network channel on the television that provides weather related information 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This information is also available on the web site.¹ I hope there will be a television channel for disseminating public health information to the general public in a similar way.

Firstly, public health practitioners can design universal non-word symbols to denote public health events. This is similar to, for example, the picture of a sun, a sun partly covered by clouds, or clouds with snow flakes, which can be easily understood by people speaking different languages.

Secondly, we can provide public health short range and long range forecasts on a number of important indicators. For example, on the weather channel there are local forecasts for this afternoon (temperature, sunny/cloudy, wind, pressure, relative humidity); conditions this evening, overnight and morning; seven day outlook; and long range forecast.

Thirdly, we can use colour coded maps to denote public health situations and predictions in space and time. For example the Weather Network uses the following colour codes for warnings: heavy snow fall (grey), blizzard (white), blowing snow (light green), wind (yellow), freezing rain (light red), heavy rainfall (green), winter storm (red), wind chill (blue).

Fourthly, regular broadcast can be interrupted by "Public Health Alert". For example, "Meteorological Alert" is a severe weather bulletin issued by Environment Canada, with warnings on a bright red background.

Fifthly, information that is relevant and used by the public can be disseminated. Information dissemination should be "user pull" rather than "provider push". For example, the following information is presented in winter on the Weather Network: highway conditions (amount of rain and snow), ski conditions (number of runs open, and snow depth), sunshine getaways (weather conditions in warm resort areas).

Sixthly, information should be presented in an interesting way. For example, today's Weather News is "St John's, Newfoundland, is expected to have 40 cm of snow this evening." Weather Facts is "it was on this day 35 years ago ...". Weather Quiz is "the coldest capital yesterday was— (A) Fredericton NB, (B) Toronto ON, (C) Winnipeg MN, (D) Edmonton AB?" The answer: "(A) –23 degrees celsius, (B) –20, (C) –36, (D) –20".

Seventhly, information should be translated to the level understood by the public. For example, a low pressure system is interpreted by the broadcaster "in other words, a weather bomb", wind chill is explained by "with the wind it feels like", and it is further explained "wind chills of –40 to –50 degrees celsius means exposed skin freezes in less than 10 minutes".

Eighthly, education and training can be provided for the public. For example, today's Weather Wise teaches about "what is an isobar?", "how does a snowflake form?", and "why does the Alberta Clipper dump a lot of snow on the East Coast of Canada?"

The basic question before putting in place a public health channel is, how can we sufficiently market public health to the general public so that people will be more concerned about their own health tomorrow than whether it is going to rain or snow tomorrow?

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