Speaker's corner

Innovative ideas needed for timely and effective public health information dissemination

Scientific findings must be published in accessible formats for the public to use. One common practice is to put information online. However, web-based information may be neither timely nor effective. There are information users who do not have access to the internet. Even among those with internet access, it may be difficult to reach a specific piece of information on a specific web site.

For example, a Google search on the internet using the key words “health + information” brought 103,000,000 web sites. If a person spends on average only one minute on each web site, it will take 588 years to go through all existing web sites assuming an eight hour workday, 365 days a year.

Innovative ideas are therefore needed for timely and effective information dissemination. Six ideas are presented here, for the purpose of stimulating further collective thinking to develop and evaluate these and some more ideas.

IDEA 1
Public health indicators may be developed for reporting to the general public after the television news, one indicator a day. For example, after the news, before the weather forecasts, the broadcaster can talk about air pollution trends in the past five years, causing predicted problems of asthma in the next three years. The general public is not expected to be watching these programmes every day, but with time their awareness and knowledge will increase.

IDEA 2
New synthetic indices for public health may be developed to disseminate public health information in a highly summary format.” This may be similar to the Dow Jones Index or the Consumer Price Index in the economic markets that help users to make decisions in their economic activities.

IDEA 3
New user-friendly information dissemination tools may be invented. For example, decision makers at Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center, California, USA, check the company’s share price by watching an office fountain, the water flow of which is controlled through an ethernet connection to a computer with the latest stock data. Flow strengthens when the price does.

IDEA 4
Forms of entertainment may be used to make public health information accessible to various audiences. For example, a group of experts at an occupational health workshop for Latin America suggested such innovative ways as writing folk songs on the health effects of pesticides for radio broadcast, and organizing concerts with themes on healthy practices. Theatrical performances such as plays have been used to disseminate public health messages.

IDEA 5
Statistics may be converted into some form of events to which people can relate. For example, in Canada there are about 167,456 deaths attributable to chronic diseases in a year. The Chronic Disease Clock was developed by Public Health Agency of Canada’s Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Control to disseminate this information in real time, and is available on the web site. It is a digital clock that shows “chronic disease related deaths so far this year” (when checked on 11 Feb 2005 at 9:30 am, it registered 18,839, 18,840, and so on), and “chronic disease related deaths so far today as of 12:00 midnight” (it registered 187, 188, and so on). The user can see increases in chronic disease deaths right before their eyes, as there is one chronic disease death in about three minutes, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

IDEA 6
Information may be converted into mind-boggling, eye-catching, attention-grabbing, or breath-taking forms. For example, figures released by the World Health Organisation in 2003 showed that road traffic incidents caused 1.2 million deaths in a year, making it the ninth leading cause of death. Commenting on the 43,000 traffic deaths in a year in the US, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration told the New York Times that “losing the equivalent of a fully loaded airliner every other day is clearly not acceptable.”

It is hoped that the six ideas presented here will lead to other innovative ideas for more timely and effective information dissemination.