

**SAN KO FA FACT SHEET**

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**Communicating the Threat of Emerging Infections to the Public**

FREIMUTH, VICKI, LINNAN, HUAN W., AND POTTER, POLYXENI (2000, JULY-AUGUST). EMERGING INFECTIOUS DISEASES, VOL. 6, NO. 4. CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, ATLANTA, GA.

Communication theory and techniques, aided by the electronic revolution provide new opportunities and challenges for the effective transfer of laboratory, epidemiologic, surveillance and other public health data to the public who funds them. . . . In the absence of cure, as in AIDS and many other public health problems, an effectively crafted and disseminated prevention message is the key control measure. Applying communication theory to disease prevention messages can increase the effectiveness of the messages and improve public health.

**Health Communication Methods**

Health communication has been defined as the study and use of methods to inform and influence individual community decisions that enhance health. Communication methods are used to create and increase public awareness of a disease; educate the public about a disease, its causes, and treatment; change a person's or group's attitudes about a disease, its causes, and treatment; change individual behavior to prevent or control a disease; advocate for policy changes in favor of disease prevention and control; and create social norms that favor healthful living. Health communication theory utilizes four key elements of the communication process: audience, message, source, and channel. Effective health communication programs identify and prioritize audience segments; deliver accurate, scientifically based messages from credible sources; and reach audiences through familiar channels.

**The Communication Process****Audience**

Understanding the audience for which a message is intended is critical to the communication process. The clearer the understanding of the audience for which a message is intended, the better the chance of developing an effective message.

**Message**

Effective health communication messages follow some general principles: they are clear and simple, positive, and both emotional and rational.

**Source**

The source influences the effectiveness of the message. A source that is credible for one segment of the audience may completely miss the mark with another. While a scientist, physician, or other health-care provider may seem the ideal source of public health information, a community activist or a lay person affected by a disease may carry more credibility and have a greater public health impact.

**Channel**

Even the best-crafted message is useless if it fails to reach the intended audience. The channel, or means by which the message is sent, is as important as the message. Multiple channels can be combined to communicate a message more effectively.

**Applying Health Communication Methods**

Communication research provides demographic and other information that can be used in choosing the right channel to meet the needs of specific population groups. Such communication channels include mass media campaigns, news media stories, popular entertainment, media advocacy, and interpersonal communication. Effective communication often involves multiple strategies and channels.

Source: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/eid/vol6no4/freimuth.htm>

For more information, call the technical assistance analyst at the Mississippi Urban Research Center, 1-866-578-6872 (JSU-MURC).

