

Writing Health for the Masses

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Health, whether it is health promotion, public health or patient care services, needs dissemination of information. Most of the information that the public receives on health comes from both printed material as well as the electronic media. The media acts as the vehicle of information, when we consider the new epidemics such as AIDS or 'mad cow' disease, and it is equally true for 'diseases of civilization' linked to unhealthy lifestyles on smoking, alcohol abuse, unhealthy food habits and lack of physical exercise etc.

The impact of disseminated information and knowledge on health through media has become a paramount importance and priority for health in the eyes of the general public. Health writers and the media have contributed immensely to the success of immunization, family planning, promotion of nutrition etc. As for those who hold key information about health matters, health experts and health communicators ought to make a greater effort to communicate thorough information to the public. **The health writer should be well aware that he is not writing a scientific publication or a research paper for a professional journal but a light reading material for his readers.** A general article on subject of health is not expected to contain and reflect in depth, detail and strict science.

The information gathered should be re-measured and only the material that could be assimilated by the public and is of importance to them should be disseminated. This is a

different process and most health writers lack the journalistic expertise to achieve this.

At the same time, it is something of a paradox that information about health, or writing on health to the general public is considered of secondary importance by writers and journalists when public interest is clearly so strong. One possible explanation of this situation is that 'medical' or 'health' information is often judged to be too specialized and that the writers themselves may suspect they don't have sufficient know how to discuss such topics without the risk of making mistakes. At the same time, many medical consultants and health experts complain that journalists and writers have distorted their statements regularly.

Before writing on health, the writer or the journalist should read whatever material is available on the subject. **He or she should be a 'mini-specialist' on the subject before the interview proper commences with the subject specialists.** He should know that the consultant might use a lot of words of medical jargon, which are alien to the public as well as to him. To overcome this situation, the writer should do his reference work early and find out the simple meanings for the medical or technical words that could come up at the interview or lecture.

It is important to have correct co-ordination and understanding between the health writer and the health specialist. Sometimes the writers take these matters too lightly, and do not pay necessary attention. At the same time, the

health specialists too are often ignorant of the ways in which health writers or journalists work, and the constraints they face. It is the responsibility of the health specialist to explain matters precisely to the writer as he or she has only limited ideas about the subject of the interview. Therefore, the specialists have to share the responsibility and take pains to ensure that what they say is very clear and simple. Medical jargon should be avoided as much as possible. The journalists in turn should not hesitate to say if they have not fully understood and to ask the person being interviewed to explain.

The health writer should keep in his mind that he is writing to a lay audience, and that they are at the mercy of the writer to understand an important but difficult subject, which affects them in their day-to-day life. Therefore, he should try to read more on the subject and using glossaries and dictionaries to make the facts as clear and simple as possible. Sometimes it may not be possible to avoid using technical words and phrases. But the writer should try to explain more words and phrases with words that are in use by the public, e.g. Dehydration - as drying up of the body. It can be further explained by taking uprooted **Balsam plant**, which will dry up immediately if sufficient water is not provided.

The health experts and the media are sometimes poles apart and have great trouble understanding each other. The health experts normally concentrate on long term, in-depth, vigorous examination of observations of statistics, while the journalists work at high speed and look for colourful, simplified and appropriate stories.

The need today is for health experts and the health writers to be driven to arrive to a mutual understanding. The health expert should understand that they can promote health only by keeping the public fully informed and the media should understand that the public insists on being better informed about health. Ideally, the information that is to be provided should consist of much more than the same old advice about hygiene, nutrition and diet, and should be deliberately aimed at developing fundamental health knowledge among the general public. This would not only help the community to protect their own health better and to avoid what might be harmful, but is also useful for better appreciation of the major health problems of our times and to support the efforts being undertaken to counteract them.