

Health Promotion: Opportunities and Challenges

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Health promotion is a vital component of public health practice. During last two decades, health promotion has been consolidated and institutionalized. Public health practitioners, policy-makers, academicians and researchers recognize the role of health promotion in improving public health. Many professional associations and scholarly journals are working in the area of health promotion [1]. In 2009, health promotion was re-defined as, "Health Promotion is the art and science of helping people discover the synergies between their core passions and optimal health, enhancing their motivation to strive for optimal health, and supporting them in changing their lifestyle to move toward a state of optimal health. Optimal health is a dynamic balance of physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health. Lifestyle change can be facilitated through a combination of learning experiences that enhance awareness, increase motivation, and build skills and, most important, through the creation of opportunities that open access to environments that make positive health practices the easiest choice" [2].

Factors Influencing Health Promotion

There are various factors which influence health promotion activities and must be kept in mind while developing health promotion programs. These factors include culture, religion, age, gender, literacy and access to modern technology. The concept of health and illness changes over time and varies according to the cultural, religious and spiritual perceptions of the community [3]. Many cultures have different roles and responsibilities, assigned to men and women. In some cultures the role of woman is of a primary care taker for the rest of the family. To fulfill this role, she is expected to sacrifice some of her personal preferences. The influence of age and gender on the concepts of health and illness can be highlighted by the excerpt from a qualitative study conducted amongst Russian immigrant women, to determine their perceptions regarding breast cancer screening. The response of a 74-year lady was, "What good would it make if I started rushing between medical offices for this and that? They would surely find some disease. Nobody of my age is totally healthy. But it is a waste of time, you cannot live forever. The time that I still have to live, I want to give to my grand children, not to myself [4]. Literacy, in general and health literacy in particular influence the concepts of health and illness. Because of increasingly complex and technologically sophisticated modern health care system, health literacy problems are also magnified [5]. Recent advances in technology especially the advent of internet has contributed to the merging of cultural perspectives and emergence of new ideas of health and illness, resulting from a combination of pre-existing and new concepts [3].

Achievements of Health Promotion

Health promotion has positively impacted public health practices. A number of public health achievements are attributed to health promotion. Ten great public health achievements of the last century include vaccination; motor-vehicle safety; safer workplaces; infectious diseases control; decrease in mortality due to coronary heart disease and stroke; safer and healthier foods; improved maternal and child health; family planning; drinking water fluoridation; and recognition of health hazards of tobacco use [6]. None of these achievements would have

been possible without health promotion. Health promotion is a means to an end, and enables people to take action. Health promotion needs to be done in collaboration with people and requires their participation or partnership. It helps groups and communities in strengthening their skills and their capacity to take actions which support healthy lifestyles. They act collectively resulting in empowerment of individuals which is a valued outcome of health promotion [7].

Opportunities for Health Promotion

A number of governments around the world are committed to health promotion for their countries. International organizations such as the World Health Organization has responded to the commitments of their member countries by providing support in health promotion and in developing policies, programs and activities related to health promotion [8]. Health care visits for various purposes are opportunities for health promotion activities. It is especially important in case of maternal health where women report routinely for antenatal care. These visits can be utilized to promote health in this vulnerable group of population [9]. Visits for childhood vaccination and growth monitoring can be utilized for health promotion to improve health of children and young adults. Follow-up visits of patients with chronic disease also provide an opportunity for health promotion activities.

A valuable opportunity for promoting health arises from the availability of advanced technology and electronic means of communication. The internet has broadened the scope of health care beyond its traditional boundaries. Mass media has an important role in promoting health. Social media can communicate the health messages to a wider, diverse group of audience.

Challenges for Health Promotion

There are multiple challenges associated with health promotion. Many countries lack capacity for health promotion practice. An important challenge is to build capacity of the workforce, organizations and infrastructure for health promotion [1]. Another challenge for health promotion is vested interest of various groups. Influential industries like food chains selling junk 'food'; alcohol and tobacco industries; have their vested interests [10]. There is increasing recognition of role of ethics in health promotion. It is argued that health promotion should be based on practical reason which helps in reflecting on the benefits and purpose of health promotion. The purpose of health promotion should be to engage individuals to reason about what they value and how they

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can adopt these values. To achieve this purpose, specific responses to local situations are required instead of treating all communities in the same way [11].

A major challenge for the future is to develop and maintain the trust of communities, especially the socially marginalized in society. In the global conditions of growing inequality and poverty, the socially marginalized, such as youth and migrant groups, may not be receptive to messages related to health promotion [12]. It will take some time and need to have dialogue with the local communities and provision of good quality, need-based services to the communities. Varying strategies will be needed for various groups in different cultural contexts. Increasing life expectancy and natural and man-made disasters has lead to growing number of people with disabilities. Improving the quality of life of people with disabilities by health promotion should also become a major focus for public health practitioners [13].

There are challenges related to research in the field of health promotion. There is lack of implementation of evidence in health promotion practice and lack of application of evidence while formulating policies [1]. There are technical problems in evaluation of health promotion projects. For conducting evaluation of health promotion projects, it is important to define and measure the outcomes of health promotion. Appropriate methodologies for evaluation of health promotion projects need to be designed and adopted [7]. To improve the quality of researches in the area of health promotion, researchers, funding agencies, and review and editorial boards of scholarly journals need to take appropriate measures [14].

Future Directions and Recommendations

Researches must be conducted to explore the role of health promotion in improving public health. Health promotion requires showing outcomes. Research should demonstrate that empowerment and participation are health promoting processes resulting in improved health. Health promotion research and practice should be integrated. There is also a need to educate researchers and practitioners of health promotion so that they can collaborate with each other [1]. The health promotion projects should be research based and audience-specific beliefs, behaviors and characteristics should be taken into account. The health communication should have culturally competent approach and religious and spiritual concepts of the audience should be understood and respected. Cross cultural communication should be utilized as an opportunity to integrate cultures [3]. It is important that researchers, public health practitioners and policy makers have cross-cultural collaboration. In this context, encouraging healthcare professionals to contribute in the form of original research articles, case reports, and other forms of inter-professional communication will help in bridging gap between research and practice in global health promotion [15].

Finally, the scholarly journals related to health promotion are playing an important role. In this context, open access journals play an even important part as they are accessible to wider audience and can contribute to health promotion of the global community. It's my hope that in the coming years, 'Journal of Biosafety & Health Education' will play a vital role in health promotion globally by creating awareness among its wider community of readers including health care professionals and community members.

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