Speaking up for healthy communities

Promoting oral health using the 4 C’s of effective communication

A presentation to the Alaska Health Summit
Matt Jacob  Wednesday, January 22, 2020
Facts alone aren’t enough

- Facts are often shared using language that lay people cannot understand.
- Facts may need context to make them relevant.
- People tend to filter the facts to align with their existing beliefs or values.

Key questions to ask

We know the facts. What do we know about our audience?

• What is their culture and core values?
• What do they already know or believe?
• Whom do they trust?
The 4 C’s of effective communication

Communicate with clarity
Low levels of health literacy

Only 1 in 8 U.S. adults is proficient

- Proficient: 12%
- Below Basic: 14%
- Basic: 21%
- Intermediate: 53%

(Source: America’s Health Literacy: Why We Need Accessible Health Information. An Issue Brief From the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2008.)
Low levels of health literacy
1. Communicate with clarity

Write and talk to the public using plain language

If your initial screening evaluation indicates you have hypertension, you will be asked to participate in the second phase of this research investigation. The investigation aims to examine a new medication that may prevent cardiovascular disease.

(Source: Jessica Ridpath, “Got plain language? 5 tips for clear, engaging writing — even in research,” Group Health Research Institute, posted on Medium.com, Oct. 17, 2016)
1. Communicate with clarity

“… the average grade level for articles with a pro-fluoride focus was more difficult to read. … Tests to assess the ease with which a text can be read also indicated that the anti-fluoride materials were more readable.”

Despite what dentists keep telling us about the protective effects of fluoride on people’s teeth, virulent myths insisting otherwise somehow manage to persist. These kinds of mistaken beliefs might be false, but their consequences are very real. Like when, in 2007, the people of Juneau, the capital of Alaska, voted to stop putting fluoride in their drinking water, over concerns about what harms it might be doing to them. The decision, coming after years of debate in Juneau between dentists and other groups, resulted in a massive, immediate change in public health policy for the city and borough’s residents. But while research into the benefits of water fluoridation has existed for decades – and suggests fluoride reduces cavities (aka caries) and associated dental disease – less is known about the effects of fluoride cessation. In other words, what happens when a population suddenly stops taking fluoride in their drinking water, over concerns about what harms it might be doing to them.
The 4 C’s of effective communication

Communicate with context
2. Communicate with context

Establish what is at stake for real people
2. Communicate with context

- Tooth decay is the **most common chronic disease** of children
- Kids with poor dental health are 3 times more likely to **miss school days**
- Adults with unhealthy or missing teeth are at a disadvantage when seeking **jobs**

Fluoride is a mineral that exists naturally in lakes, rivers, groundwater and the oceans.

JENNIFER MEYER: By taking the fluoride out of the water supply, the tradeoff for that is children are going to experience one additional caries procedure per year at a ballpark of $300 more per child.

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

A little more than a decade ago, the city of Juneau, Alaska, became one of many American cities that stopped adding fluoride to its tap water. At the time, science predicted more cavities. That prediction has now proven true. From member station KTOO, Jeremy Hsieh reports.

JEREMY HSIEH, BYLINE: Jennifer Meyer is a public health researcher with a new study in the journal BMC Oral Health. She talks about tooth decay and cavities the way dentists do. She calls them caries. And after studying what happened in Juneau to children under 6, this is her takeaway.
Analogy: “Do we need both kinds of fluoride?”

- Air bags help to protect passengers riding in a car. But we still need to wear seatbelts.
- Toothpaste and fluoridated water also work in different ways to prevent cavities. We need both of them.
Analogy: “What about the warning on toothpaste?”
The 4 C’s of effective communication

Communicate with care
# 3. Communicate with care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific Term</th>
<th>Scientific/Public Health Meaning</th>
<th>How the Public May Hear It</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surveillance</td>
<td>Health department data</td>
<td>Government monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random sample</td>
<td>A subset in which each member had an equal chance of being selected</td>
<td>They picked people without thinking carefully about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemical</td>
<td>Any substance consisting of matter</td>
<td>A substance that is “artificial” and toxic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>An evidence-based health practice</td>
<td>The government is taking on new authority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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(Source: These terms were drawn from or inspired by the following article: R. Somerville and S.J. Hassol, “Communicating the science of climate change,” Physics Today, 2011, accessible at https://doi.org/10.1063/PT.3.1296)
Avoid using terms that have a negative meaning to your audience

3. Communicate with care

Letter to the Editor: fluoridation revolutionized dentistry

Regarding the letters about fluoride, I have proof it is good for dentistry and Oklahomans ("No studies link water fluoridation to better tooth decay rates," Feb. 22 and "End adding fluoride to the city's water supply," Feb. 14).

I am not in favor of chemicals of any kind, but I drank my city's water for more than 65 years, and it has had no negative effect on me or anyone I know.

In 1950, dentists in my city examined all preschool children for cavities and found rampant decay among many baby teeth too extensive to repair. Those early bloomers with permanent molars had decay almost beyond repair.

Two or three years later, our city put fluoride in the drinking water, and the teeth of these preschool children improved. There was less decay by 50%

(Source: Dr. William J. Hardin, "Water fluoridation revolutionized dentistry with decay improvements," letter to the editor, Tulsa World, March 2019.)
3. Communicate with care

“I’m a parent too so I can imagine what you thought when you heard that.

“Let me share what I know about that study and why I feel confident that fluoride is a safe way to protect teeth.”
The 4 C’s of effective communication

Communicate with collaboration
4. Communicate with collaboration

Trusted voices in a town of 13,000 residents

"Close the circle and fluoridate the water. Support the new dental clinic as the last step for healthy smiles in Meadville."

- Dick Astor, retired Superintendent of Conneaut School District

For more information visit www.meadvillesmiles.com
The 4 C’s of effective communication

1. Communicate with clarity
2. Communicate with context
3. Communicate with care
4. Communicate with collaboration
Questions?
Comments?

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