

**EDITORIAL****USE OF POSTERS TO COMMUNICATE DRUG-RELATED MESSAGES**

Visual aids particularly billboards and posters have been used effectively to communicate important messages on a variety of subjects. They are effective in overcoming language barriers and if well designed can simplify technical information so that it is understood even by illiterate persons. The assumption is that the target group in the captive area can identify correctly, symbols, cartoons and pictures used to convey the intended message.

Posters displayed in public places must be unambiguous, self-explanatory and not open to misinterpretation. Unfortunately there are probably few symbols, if any, capable of carrying universal messages cutting across cultural, religious, language and racial barriers. Often, posters have to be designed with a particular community in mind. Five interlinked rings embossed on Olympic flag is self-explanatory to many of us but means absolutely nothing to an illiterate person whose world does not extend beyond the horizon as defined by the adjacent ridges, valleys and rivers. In America, the sign of "Mr. Yak" denotes poison and is easily understood by many, including very young children, yet in many other countries it means nothing. In many African countries, posters meant to convey messages on sexual behavior are difficult to design since the subject of sex is often considered taboo.

An article in this issue of the journal by *Adome et. al.* discusses the uses of posters to carry messages on the use and misuse of drugs. It addresses a very pertinent question of whether people are capable of interpreting the intended message when they look at a poster for the first time. From a survey carried out in Uganda, the authors conclude that posters were not easily understood and often conveyed the wrong message. In some instances the respondent interpreted the message quite opposite of what was intended. Thus for example, in answer to a poster warning against self-medication, a respondent interpreted the poster to mean, "it shows how you can treat yourself."

A respondent's interpretation of a poster may be influenced by a number of factors, such as his/her perception and expectations. In many African communities, sharing of limited resources (food, water, medicine) is intricately intertwined with their destiny. For them it may be difficult to comprehend why sharing of a medicine and meant for one individual is undesirable. Similarly, since a medicine is meant to treat illness, it is difficult to comprehend why one should continue taking medicines long after he/she has recovered as is the case with tuberculosis chemotherapy after the first 3-4 months of treatment. The environment under which the questionnaire is administered is important. People who visit health facilities (hospital, dispensaries etc) are often under stress due to illnesses. Often they are afraid, anxious embarrassed, confused and feel threatened, and contrary to popular belief this does not only apply to simple rural folks.

The finding of *Adome et. al.* raises important questions regarding the way posters have been used in other problematic areas, such as maternal child health. They have been used to promote breast-feeding, immunization against communicable diseases, such as polio, measles and tuberculosis. They have also been used to promote rational drug use by discouraging overreliance on antibiotics and injections. Posters have also been used extensively in the fight against sexually transmitted diseases. Clearly the question arises as to whether they have been effective as generally assumed. A lot of financial and human resources have been invested in these programmes and the returns have been disproportionately low. If the use of posters to convey messages is to succeed, baseline data need to be generated to identify the major constraints and the best way respondents can identify with the posters. Data obtained in one geographical region should not be interpolated to other situations arbitrarily without due considerations of important variables, such as cultural practices and taboos. For example, belief in ancestral spirits is inimical to the Christian doctrine but can nevertheless be used to carry important messages among certain communities. As one poet put it, there is nothing wrong in gathering honey from the weed and making a moral lesson of the devil.

**Editor-in-Chief**