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JAMES MACKAY *

COMMENTS ON SCHULZ

Peter J. Schulz has produced a well written and thought provoking article.

He starts with a general examination of the field of health communication and then outlines a number of ongoing research projects in the Institute of Communication and Health.

The general examination

The author notes that this field is a relatively modern academic discipline with exponential growth over the last 35 years, in the number of research centres in Europe and the number of academic journals related to this field. I am certain that all worthwhile interventions in health should improve outcomes almost by definition. In theory, an intervention which clearly does not improve outcomes should either be stopped or not introduced. However in the real world, many interventions are started or continued without proper and accurate measurement of outcomes. The situation is further complicated by the interplay of several different interventions affecting the outcome which has been measured, making it difficult or impossible to accurately attribute response to an individual intervention.

The introduction distinguishes between interpersonal and mass communication. In the field of interpersonal communication emphasis is placed on the relationships between the health professional and the patient, and how these relationships develop, and how these relationships affect the behaviour of the patient. There is a considerable body of literature on these topics, which unfortunately exclusively focuses on patients who are unwell. There is very little information on the relationship between entirely well and healthy people and health care professionals,

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except in the field of genetic counselling where well people are seeking information on the risk of developing an illness themselves or the risk of one of their relatives developing an illness. In the field of mass communication there is much more information on targeting well people because of work on health promotion and disease prevention. Recent work has focussed on the recipient as a more active participant in the communication process, and it is this perspective which the staff in the Institute of Communication and Health have embraced.

Current projects

Schulz lists a diverse collection of individual projects being pursued in the Institute, and then goes on to discuss the concept of health literacy. He extends this concept beyond functional, interactive and critical literacy to develop the idea that literacy is integral to the lived experience of a person. Schulz's vision highlights the ultimately subjective nature of a person's interaction with the plethora of health information which surrounds us all. I find his vision intellectually attractive and I believe that the concepts he has started to develop may well have important consequences for the whole field of health communication.

The emphasis on measuring outcomes is essential, but the innovation stems from the harnessing of a diversity of expertise towards a common goal. There are two specific areas in which I think Schulz's vision is particularly important. The field of oncology provides an interesting example; as we improve the literacy of the population regarding an understanding of cancer we reduce the almost inevitable fear and anxiety associated with that dreaded diagnosis, and assist the cancer patient towards a more comfortable and serene acceptance of the situation. Another important area of medicine is found in the professional description and adoption of new technology. An accurate understanding of the disadvantages as well as the advantages of new techniques is absolutely essential to facilitate an appropriate assessment of each technique by the end user, the patient. Highly developed communication skills will be vital to prevent inappropriate enthusiasm on the part of the general public, which is so often followed by widespread disillusionment, and often the abandoning or reduced uptake of techniques which actually are clearly beneficial in either the individual or the collective situation.