

COMMUNICATION AND RESEARCH: A POSSIBLE INTEGRATION

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In the twentieth century it was widely believed that infectious diseases were no longer to be considered among the most important problems in public health. In countries with advanced economies, in fact, a drastic reduction of such diseases has been achieved thanks to advanced scientific research, the use of vaccines and the introduction of antibiotics. However, at the beginning of the third millennium, new infectious diseases, in particular Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and related opportunistic infections such as tuberculosis, have demonstrated the world's population susceptibility to infection. Even today, infectious diseases by multiple etiologic agents (viruses, bacteria, fungi and protozoa) are the leading cause of death and the main determinant of disability or socio-economic hardship for millions of people around the world. Infectious diseases affect 365 million people, most of whom live in developing countries. More than 14 million people die annually due to these diseases.

In such a complex scenario the RCT (psycho-socio-behavioral Research, Communication, Training) Unit of the Department of Infectious, Parasitic and Immune-mediated Diseases (MIPI) of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS, the National Institute of Health in Italy) is working to reach these goals:

- integrating psycho-social approach with biomedicine in order to meet the health needs of the population and provide appropriate responses in relation to infectious diseases (psycho-socio-behavioral research);
- delivering scientific and personalized information on HIV infection and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) considering the complexity of psychological variables, social and cultural rights of individuals (phone counselling on HIV/AIDS and STD);
- translating the results of studies and research on infectious diseases, with particular reference to STD, in effective messages helping people to both improve the quality of life and choose healthier lifestyles (communication).
- promoting and spreading knowledge and expertise on communication and relational issues through training programs addressed to National Health Service (NHS) operators, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Voluntary Associations (VA) and Community of Migrants (CM) (training).

Role of RCT Unit

The partnerships between health professionals and experts in the biomedical research, human/social sciences, the psycho-socio-behavioral research and communication/training has allowed to develop, share and implement some precious strategies to promote and protect health, preventing HIV infection, tuberculosis and other STD. The commitment of the RCT Unit team initially focused on the HIV phone counselling activity and more recently on STD. Such counselling activity provided the RCT Unit researchers elements and indicators to engage also in other areas, in response to some of the institutional functions of the MIPI Department.

The RCT Unit working group – in addition to the daily HIV/AIDS and STD phone counselling activities – is currently working on:

- scientific research in the psycho-socio-behavioral area;
- training/intra-extramural update courses for NHS staff and VA operators;
- health education aimed to the youth population and vulnerable groups (migrants, women);
- consultation and collaboration with research institutes, ministries and local governments concerning the health of migrant populations

HIV/AIDS and STD phone counselling

Within the context of HIV, AIDS and STD information intervention, counselling has proved to be a precious operational tool. This method, which involves an operator and a properly trained person/user, is characterized by the application of knowledge, personal qualities or skills such as active listening and empathy, as well as professional communication strategies and techniques aiming at both the activation and reorganization of the people's potential (empowerment). The goal is to make choices and changes in situations perceived as difficult by the individual himself or to tackle, in an active way, problems and difficulties relating to different personal situations. HIV/AIDS and STD phone counselling activities are located inside the RCT Unit of the ISS. This service of phone counselling (known as *Telefono Verde AIDS* (TVA), established in 1987 by the National Commission for the fight against AIDS and co-financed by the Ministry of Health and the ISS itself, was the first nationwide experience of public AIDS Helpline, engaged in both primary and secondary prevention of HIV infection and addressed to Italian and foreign general population. From March 2007 to December 2008 a “transcultural” phone counselling activity was started thanks to the work of highly skilled cultural mediators, able to answer in seven languages (English, French, Romanian, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and Russian). During these years, the RCT Unit working group has been coordinated by a scientific responsible, collaborating with researchers and consultants coming from different areas, and with different expertise and overseen – periodically – by a supervisor. The positive impact of this approach resides in the opportunity to answer directly to the person/user, through a personal interview able to give the right specific and scientific information which will be transformed into personalized messages, necessary to promote the implementation of both healthy changes in the people's behaviors and the implementation of Life-skills designed to avoid risky behaviors. Gathering such wide and different experience has allowed us to develop a standardized phone counselling method to:

- supply scientifically accurate information on HIV infection, AIDS and sexually transmitted infections through a custom interview;
- gather information on specific population groups (such as the reasons leading those people to get an HIV test, acceptability of a vaccine against HIV, etc.);
- make telephone surveys.

This expertise has been used to intervene both in emergency situations, caused by morbid events causing health alarm in the population (Necrotizing Fasciitis, Ebola Virus, Bioterrorism) and in fields concerning drug addiction, organ transplants, heat waves and rare diseases, more recently, in the recruitment procedures for the testing of anti-HIV vaccine based on TAT protein.

The HIV/AIDS and STD phone counselling (800861061 available only from Italy) is done anonymously and it is free of charge from Monday to Friday, 13.00 to 18.00. During the last 24 years this precious service has been able to get and answer about 671.823 calls for a total of over 1.762.369 questions, with an average of 120 calls a day (1-7).

Scientific research in the psycho-socio-behavioral area

Since the early 90s, extensive research have been carried out in the psycho-socio-behavioral domain funded by the European Commission and the Ministry of Health with the help of the NHS structures, universities, research institutes, NGOs and VA.

The main research areas in which the team is committed are:

- identification and testing of intervention models to improve adherence to HIV screening tests (8-10);
- promotion and protection of foreigner's health with particular reference to HIV/AIDS infection, tuberculosis, human papilloma virus and STD. In this scenario, the Italian National Focal Point (Infectious Diseases and Migrant) has been working since 1997 through the coordination of RCT Unit and the involvement of 70 experts of public network, NGOs and VA from different regions of North, Central and Southern Italy (11-14);
- evaluation of interventions to prevent infectious diseases addressed to foreign people and evaluation of HIV/AIDS counselling in cross-cultural context (15-17);
- analysis of the quality of life of people living with HIV, with particular reference to the issues related to the need for parenthood;
- study of the attitudes and socio-demographic characteristics of people with HIV risk behaviours and people affected by HIV (18-21);
- network of 23 HIV/AIDS phone counselling services over the national territory (1, 3).

Training

Since 1991, some researchers of RCT Unit are engaged in intra-and extramural training/update activities on issues of effective *vis à vis* and telephone communication and counselling for NHS, NGO and VA psycho-social and health operators within different areas. More than 8,000 operators have been trained through the years. Learning or improving professional counselling skills may be an important educational tool for implementing effective communication of health professionals dealing directly or indirectly, with any issue related to infectious diseases. Through the application of the andragogical learning theory of the American scholar Malcolm Knowles, the training and the personal experience of individual health professionals become a central element of both the person and the professional figure. The aim is to encourage new cognitive schemata, conceptual elaborations and links to practical experience, allowing not only a quick and accurate response to individual requests but also a more specific action in relation to the complexity of the different topics.

In this specific context, the basic assumption of this kind of training is the actual availability and the inner motivation of the operator to establish a strong relationship with the other, based on trust, cooperation, unconditional acceptance, authenticity and empathy (22-24).

Health education activities

The intra and extramural health education activities aimed at both secondary/high schools and university students has been carried out in collaboration with regional services through seminars and peer education interventions in order to make a concerted prevention action within the field of STD targeting both the young Italian and foreign people (25-27).

Consultancy and collaboration activities

No less important have been those consulting activities carried out primarily with the Ministry of Health and with other Italian universities which have led to a fruitful collaboration. As for the Ministry of Health, the RCT Unit contribution was largely developed in some information and educational campaigns for the fight against AIDS as well as in the development of some phone counselling services in health emergency situations; furthermore, a Public Relations Office has been created for the Ministry itself while in the university field some intervention tools and techniques for the prevention of infectious diseases, have been identified.

Conclusions

The work done by the team of the U.O. RCF since 1987 has allowed us to increase scientific research in a field of social sciences which is unfortunately not fully developed in Italy yet; we have been also able to transform these studies and research results into effective messages for the general population in order to guide people to better behaviors and lifestyle, promoting health and improving the quality of life. The control of infectious diseases is a challenge to the modern paradigm of biomedical sciences, requiring innovative prevention models and necessary partnerships between different disciplines or professional areas. Therefore, we believe that the presence of the RCF operational unit within the Department MIPI, may represent not only a concrete experience of an integrated approach to the study of infectious diseases, but also an operative model to tackle those health issues involving both the individual and the entire community.

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