

Preface to Special Issue on Cost-Effectiveness Analysis

This special issue of the *Journal of Health Communication: International Perspectives*, coedited by Jane Bertrand of Johns Hopkins University and Paul Hutchinson of Tulane University, examines the current challenges addressing cost-effectiveness, namely, costing communication programs, as well as measures their effectiveness.

Those of us engaged in applied research in the field of health communication are aware of the challenges posed by agencies and donors requesting demonstrations from investments in communication. Of course, many reading this issue already may be convinced of the value of communication as an intervention; the trend toward evidence-based approaches and results includes demonstration of effectiveness including economic factors.

Questions on return investment (e.g. health outcomes, cost-effectiveness, etc.) have been tantamount to the field with related research addressing these issues. In 2000, USAID had reviewed 283 articles in both peer-reviewed and other literature related to health communication outcomes, 93 of which met the criteria for an evidence-based study (for information see <http://www.comminit.com/strategicthinking/usaidreport/sld-1932.html>). Some of the same questions identified in this analysis are addressed in this special issue. How much do we really know? Are we using the right approaches? Should there be quality standards for methodology and reporting? Are we examining/measuring the right indicators for impact and success?

This issue provides the latest evidence and expert analysis on cost-effectiveness. Dr. Hutchinson suggests that an alternate title for this issue is “Determining the Bang for the Buck.” Cost-effectiveness helps us decide which programs give us the best outcome for the cost by answering questions like, “How we can make sure that we are getting the most behavior change for our program dollar?” and “Can we alter the mix of our different communication subinterventions to achieve greater gains?” or “Can we demonstrate that health communication interventions are a bargain relative to other alternatives?” This set of research further challenges us to think of the standardized approaches in public health and economics (e.g., the use of disability adjusted life years [DALYs]). While the applied communication examples in this issue are from developing countries, a review of the existing literature on the cost-effectiveness of communication programs to produce health outcomes identifies 45 studies both in developed and developing countries. Methodological applications with sound principles and applications as demonstrated herewith should promote the appropriate use of cost-effectiveness analysis in relation to communication in behavior and social change programs.

Ideally, these articles and the body of literature can be coupled with ethical ideals, creativity, and financial support to achieve the health outcomes that include communication as an intervention. As readers and researchers, we should continue

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to publish our results with “standardized” methodologies and measures. Yet, it is incumbent upon us to advance our field and quality contribution by continually challenging ways to measure and add value; share experiences across countries, cultures, and environments; explore new design approaches and perhaps theoretical constructs; demonstrate the impact of “noise” (e.g., debate and dialogue) vs. planned and crafted messages; harness new technologies and approaches; and advance ethical decision making.