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Karolina Czerwiec, Marcin Purchałka

The role of the media in health education

Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 established health education as the fundamental right for all children. Health is a huge value for both individuals and society as a whole. Promoting appropriate behaviour is a global health idea. Around the world, efforts are aimed at protecting and improving health. In our daily life we should not only focus on taking care of our physical but also mental and social health. This is possible owing to the health education, the aim of which is the acquisition of knowledge about how to take care of our health and the environment. It is in fact crucial for the implementation of our life plans, ambitions, and physical and spiritual development.

Health education is based on scientific grounds; it offers the opportunity to learn and consciously decide on matters relating to health. The family is responsible for this process as well as the education system and society as a whole (Resolution of the Council of the European Community 2009). Modern health education should be based on the following: acquisition of knowledge and skills related to the disease and the functioning of the body, to be able to cope with difficult situations; increasing the level of knowledge and skills related to the system of health care and using it; raising the level of awareness in relation to the impact of social, political, environmental and human health factors (Potyrała, Walosik 2007, 2008).

Methodology and research concept

Research objectives focus on: / 1 / analysis of the hazards affecting people, including schoolchildren, in connection with an inadequate knowledge of health education; / 2 / examining ways of representing the currently prevailing views on health and popularizing the knowledge about health education in the media and their associated social institutions.

The research hypothesis was formulated assuming that with the development of various types of media, issues of health education are more frequently addressed, thereby increasing people's awareness on the subject. The above-mentioned

analysis was carried out so as to, on the basis of selected examples, show how the approach to health has changed in recent years. It is important to show how the health issues are interpreted, and to show a different perspective on the perception of health aspects, not only the physical and biological, but also the cultural and social ones.

Results

Over the past several decades, the interest in the issues of health has significantly increased. It is also defined differently, depending on one's point of view: the perception of it by theologians differs from the perception of psychologists or sociologists and doctors. Many international organizations, and in recent years also Polish ones, encourage the implementation of health education. Nowadays prevention programs for various diseases are common. Very often, governmental, non-governmental and scientific organizations encourage immunization, preventive examinations, courses in first aid, or actions to discourage drug use. Unfortunately, very often people just do not want to use that help, which is probably due to the lack of adequate knowledge about their importance, and the consciousness of people about health. Therefore, development of healthy behaviours should begin in early childhood, making this type of action by the media, practically available to everyone, most appropriate.

In Poland, in the years 1992–1995, thanks to the initiative of WHO, a program "School Promoting Health" was started. Its aim was to create an environment that would increase the well-being of students and school staff, as well as the development in the school community of the need to take action concerning one's own and other people's health and taking care of the appropriate condition of the environment. Its assumption related to: the creation of health relevant physical and social conditions at school; participation of students, teachers and parents in health promotion projects; scientific research giving evidence that the approach to health as a whole helps the school students to solve health problems; cooperation with the local communities to increase health awareness (Woynarowska 2007).

The tasks of modern education are related to the core curriculum of general education curricula and education standards. There are trends evident in the change of the approach to the school and social knowledge. One of the elements of this knowledge is the development of responsibility for the health of an individual and others, understanding the relationship between man and the environment (Potyrała 2011). Very popular forms of spreading the knowledge of health education are periodical projects. The media facilitate access to various kinds of health information. However, they often cause the feelings of confusion, fear, and anxiety. Thus, health education should include a critical skills assessment of information provided by the media in terms of their credibility. The media have a very strong impact on the contemporary society, which is why it is important to be able to use them in the right way to promote health and health education. It is also vital to keep in mind that it

is not just the media that will develop people's appropriate behaviour in terms of health awareness (Wojnarowska 2007).

Many actions to protect the health of young people evolve around promoting positive feelings towards food. The aim of the social campaign "Drink milk! You'll be great!" was to create the need to drink milk in the minds of school-age children. Very often, in fact, it was linked with something distasteful and forced. Polish children were drinking not enough of milk, which was associated with an increase in the number of people suffering from bone diseases in later life. Spots appearing in the media were supposed to make parents aware of the role of milk in the lives of their children, and make the children themselves perpetuate the belief that drinking milk is associated with well-being.

A lot of famous people like Kayah, Boguslaw Linda, and Krzysztof Holowczyc took part in this project. Another action – "Mom, Dad, I prefer water" – was a campaign of education through which parents were made aware that water plays a very important role in the daily diet of children. It was to help families in their proper nutrition habits and to teach children the principles of healthy eating.

In Poland, there was also an action called "Poland Is Running". Anyone could participate, as dictated routes were of varying length or level of difficulty, and you could choose a route that runs through the woods or the city. The action was to make people aware that movement should play a very important role in life. To promote the idea of running, one must create favourable conditions for doing so in the surrounding environment. In Poland, several actions were organized to improve the state of nature, and thus the health of ourselves. One of them was an action under the slogan "Grow with us a million of trees," in which television celebrities were involved. Another project, the "Earth Day", was to educate people that they should segregate waste, save water, not waste electricity, limit driving and instead use the public transportation, not use plastic bags from stores and replace them with eco-bags. This last concept was related to a campaign called "Clean Up the World", in which different levels of school education were significantly involved.

On 14th October, each year, 'World Hand Washing Day' takes place. It has been implemented by UNICEF with the aim to convince people that hand washing with soap and water is of great importance and prevents many diseases, and often saves lives. The awareness of people on this issue, however, is small – it is very surprising, since in the era of availability of various kinds of products, soap can be bought almost everywhere. It is indicated that hand washing should last about 30 seconds and should be done: after returning home, after using the bathroom, before eating, or in the course of any disease that involves cough.

A very emotional campaign for the health and life was the action "Stop Rotaviruses." In the advertising spot we could see a mother sitting at the hospital bed of her child that had a drip attached to its arm. The mother's facial expression indicated that the child's health was not good. This affected the attitudes of parents who saw this ad, who grew anxious about the health of their own children.

This campaign was to raise awareness of parents in caring for the health of their family. A similar effect was exerted by the campaign "Stop Pneumococcus." It concerned the vaccination of children against pneumococcal infections, and its slogan was: "You have the right to know, you have the right to ask." Although also related to the health of children, it was rated much worse since it was considered to cause fear and did not mobilize people to enforce pro-health behaviours. Poland's largest action on behalf of children is organized every year under the name "The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity." This nationwide campaign is based on auctions, collecting donations in exchange for a sticker in the shape of a heart with the logo of the campaign, and everything is broadcasted live on television. This event's aim is to raise funds for the purchase of specialized equipment that different hospital wards treating children should be equipped with.

The slogan "Stop to Cervical Cancer" is known to the majority of people watching television. Pro-health campaign "Vaccinate good behaviours" evolved around actions preventing cervical cancer, possibilities of carrying out cytology, and vaccinations against HPV. The aim was to popularize the idea of mothers and daughters working together for health. Such actions are also in the program of actions of the National Organization for the Eradication of Cervical Cancer "Feminine Flower".

Attitudes towards the presentation of sexuality in the media differ. They relate to the risks arising from advertising (AIDS, venereal disease, lung cancer), denial of biological regularities in commercials ("no" impotence after drinking alcohol), abnormal biology through cultural interaction (body weight – being overweight and weight-loss diet), fitness / gym / bodybuilding / plastic surgery as a search for the "ideal body" against biology, slim body and shame due to obesity, growing up – weight gain and cultural expectations, eroticisation of products, the way of advertising alcohol, the 'Barbie dolls' body as the ideal to follow, or the theme of the races (the superiority of the "true" white body against the "inferior" black body) (Melosik 2006, 2010).

A very important thing is to promote, especially among young people, safe behaviour in the sphere of sexual life. People are usually very well aware of the fact that venereal diseases exist. In spite of that fact they take the risk of unsafe sexual contacts and do not even think that the disease can affect them. Alcohol and drugs cause lack of control over sexual behaviour and contribute to the occurrence of accidental sexual contact and, in extreme cases, prostitution. One of the actions to fight HIV was a campaign in the media under the slogan "Travel Stop 50 zł. HIV free" and showed a prostitute leaning against the car and talking to the driver. Another campaign was under the slogan "You will not get me." It was attended by representatives of the media, such as Alexandra Kwaśniewska, Malgorzata Socha and Jakub Wesolowski, who had to draw the public attention to the importance of testing for HIV in the body. This was important because in Poland the awareness of virus detection and blocking it in its early stages was very low. Efforts were made to make the public aware that testing for HIV detection increases the chance to extend life and improve the quality of life of infected people.

A number of campaigns to prevent the spread of AIDS and HIV were done outside Polish borders. To prevent behaviour that in one of the commercials was presented with the sentence: "Fast Sex, Great Sex. Anytime! Anywhere!", commercials appeared showing two pairs of feet, pointing in the opposite direction. On the big toe of each pair of feet, there was a piece of paper, probably personal information, and the feet were sticking out from under a white sheet – same as the one used to cover corps in the morgue. Below them were the words: "There is still no cure for AIDS. Protect yourself".

In Milan a happening was organized to draw the attention of young people that taking risk in sexual contacts, such as unprotected sexual intercourse, can result in AIDS. Organizers encouraged people to take part in the action via online portals. In front of the Milan University a condom was set up, large enough to fit in 100 adults. It turned out that 200 people went in and it received a lot of attention in the media.

In addition to the project that aimed to strengthen health, health education focuses on prevention of abuse of substances like tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. The current generation of young people is very vulnerable to the contact with these substances, which can lead to serious health risks. Such substances are most popular among people aged 15–34 years. Among adults in Poland, drug use is relatively rare and is much less common than among the young people. Experimenting with psychoactive substances is one of the characteristics of adolescence. Drinking alcohol and smoking is in majority the beginning for initiating contact with drugs. It is very rare that someone starts using marijuana without first drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. Also, it is rare that young people who have turned to heroin or amphetamine, had no previous contact with marijuana. These observations are the base for a conclusion that limiting experiences of children and adolescents with alcohol and cigarettes at the earliest stage can prevent the effects of their usage, as well as limit the risk of starting to use other dangerous substances (Wojnarowska 2007). Since 31st May 1987, as an initiative of WHO, "No Tobacco Day" takes place. Its aim is to send a message to people that smoking leads to diseases and even death. In the U.S., it is even celebrated as the "Day of quitting." Preventive actions in this area allow smokers to receive tips on how to get help in quitting smoking, free medical tests, such as blood pressure test, cholesterol measurements, or carbon monoxide in exhaled air measurements. In connection with the fact that smoking becomes less fashionable, it starts to disturb an increasing number of people. Therefore, in many countries, including Poland, smoking was banned in public places, i.e. those in which smoke could harm the health of people in the company of a smoker. Another way of fighting smoking, with the aim of raising awareness of the health risks associated with it, are short sentences which since some time ago have been placed on cigarette packs. In general, they are pretty drastic, like "smoking kills", "Smoking can seriously harm you and those in your surrounding", "Smoking causes heart disease", or "Smoking can damage sperm and reduce fertility." One of the foreign campaigns to encourage pregnant women to quit smoking was rather drastic. It used posters which depicted a human foetus in an ashtray full of cigarette butts. In Poland the

“Day Without Alcohol” is also celebrated, established by the government on 1st June. Around Easter, the “Week of Prayer for Sobriety of the Nation” takes place and the “National Day of Sobriety”. The aim of the campaign is to encourage the reduction of drinking alcohol during social events, as well as showing the positive aspects of abstinence. There are also preventive campaigns concerning other psychoactive substances. One of them is the campaign “Stop the Drugs”. People engaged, who are opposing the distribution of this kind of stimulators, want to educate the public on the dangers of those legal drugs. Due to the fact that they do not contain illegal ingredients, they are legal, despite the fact that they work on the same principle as drugs. They are often sold as “collectibles” to facilitate their distribution, and the prosecution of the manufacturers under the charge of putting the human life and health into danger is difficult, since on the packages we can see inscriptions such as “not for human consumption”; “if ingested, immediately contact a doctor”.

Throughout the year, but especially during the holidays, there is a great need for blood at the donation points. The European Voluntary Blood Donor Foundation organizes campaigns to encourage people to donate blood as part of the Honourable Blood-Giving Campaign. The campaign “Blood Brothers” (‘Krewniacy’), which was conducted by the Polish television, and Polish artists under the banner of “bestow upon each other,” was to convince the public that blood donation does not bring any harm to the human body. Through fundraising they purchased buses used for blood collection, and one can support the action by sending a text message to the number indicated in the campaign.

The high demand for blood results, among others, from the fact that there is a frighteningly large number of road accidents, where people involved need blood transfusions to save their lives. Therefore, it can be noticed that there is an increasing number of campaigns organized to prevent causes of car accidents.

In a series of public campaigns called “Switch On Thinking” an educational campaign “The last jump” appeared. It concerned the necessity of fastening the seat belts at any time while driving, even during the shortest drive. This was to reduce the number of fatalities on the roads. It sought to implant into the minds of road users that the seat belt does not cost anything and can save lives. The promotion of this campaign in the media was very appropriate since Polish drivers are convinced that they are prominent experts in the field of driving and always, in every situation will be able to control their car.

Too much haste on Polish roads inspired the campaign “Do not rush – switch on your mind”. Television, radio, newspapers and the Internet joined in the campaign. One of the ads showed a traffic accident in which its victim was in a plastic zippered black bag. This quite drastic scene was to help make drivers realize that driving fast does not lead to anything good.

One of the campaigns aimed at drivers was held under the slogan “Have you been drinking? Do not drive.” The campaign aimed to raise awareness of threats associated with driving a vehicle after consuming alcohol. It was an appropriate campaign, since there have been numerous reports in the media on intoxicated drivers

and the fatalities caused by their irresponsibility and lack of imagination. It can also be noticed that it is usually the young drivers who drive too fast, often inadequately to the weather conditions, and often do not pay attention to priority signs at junctions. Unfortunately, it is the young people driving cars under the influence of alcohol that cause the most of the accidents.

Conclusions

In the case of pupils, it is very important that they should be able to recognize and effectively respond to the signs of their health problems, or problems observed in someone from their environment, using various sources of knowledge. It is important, however, that they should be able to select the obtained information, evaluate it, as well as use it in everyday life. The earlier a child begins to come into contact with the formation of positive health behaviours, the easier it will be in the future for that child to act according to the healthy lifestyle standards. With all certainty it can be concluded that health education should continue throughout a person's whole life and appear in a very natural way. It should take place in the family, school and social life.

In the structures of school knowledge, there are different aspects of health education that students should acquire, which would have a positive effect on their physical and mental development. In this respect, it is very important that students get interested in health issues and implement in their healthy lifestyle the habits of hygiene, nutrition, exercise, or a broad-based security. Such actions are not only possible thanks to the school, but also to the media. For children and young people of school age, they are often a stimulus that affects them with more strength than school. Therefore, social media communication should provide accurate information about health and disease. Television programs, radio broadcasts, commercials, or newspaper articles often present the latest research on health, advice on the proper way of life, and information about the diseases.

It is important that the media transmit information that is accurate and true, such that would indeed clearly influence health-promoting behaviours of the society, including young people. The distortion of understanding health just to advertise a product is simply unethical, and yet there are still adverts of food products and cosmetics which are the result of current prevailing fashion. Advertised as "healthy", they often are not. Lotions for wrinkles, products such as "light", ready meals for babies, guides on healthy nutrition, products advertised with their unbelievable effects, are all advertised in a very attractive way. Advertising often encourages to buying products such as potato chips, cigarettes, alcohol and sweets. Everyone knows that these products are harmful to the body and health, and yet they have a high level of sales. Therefore, it is not just the ad that is the only one to be blamed for improper health habits. On each packaging of food products we can find their composition and calorific value, and on cigarette packs we can see the information about the harmful ingredients, and the consequences of smoking.

In many cases, the media have a very positive impact on the development of healthy attitudes. They encourage a healthy lifestyle and taking care of the environment, which is in that form in harmony with our health. The media show how to take care of your health and how to follow the rules of hygiene in various areas of everyday life, thus, they activate students to take healthy actions in their families, in their surrounding and the society in which they live.

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Abstract

Modern education is associated with a significant tendency to change the approach to the school programs and social knowledge. One of the elements of this knowledge is developing the responsibility for the health of an individual and other people. Health is recognized as a fundamental concept in education, and 65% of adult Poles list it as a condition of a happy life. Health education is a process based on scientific principles that create opportunities for learning and making conscious decisions about your health. Responsible for this process are the family, the education system and the society. Educational activities should be directed to: discussion and enhancement of knowledge about health and health risks, the development of appropriate attitudes towards the application of the principles of hygiene, disease prevention and treatment. Therefore, an analysis of ways to spread knowledge about the health allows to note the numerous examples of social campaigns connected with the promotion of health behaviours in biological, social, cultural and moral contexts.

Key words: health knowledge, media, social attitudes

Karolina Czerwiec

Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland

Marcin Purchałka

Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland