
Executive summary

Health Council of the Netherlands. Plan of campaign. Promotion of healthy behaviour by mass media education. The Hague: Health Council of the Netherlands, 2006; publication no. 2006/16.

The aim of lifestyle campaigns is to motivate people to adopt healthier behaviour. What factors contribute to the effectiveness of such campaigns? This was the question that the President of the Health Council submitted for consideration by an expert committee. In accordance with the President's request, the Committee has primarily focused on the mass media component. Various new developments, such as the Internet and the provision of personalised information by computer, were also examined.

The Committee found itself in agreement with an evaluation of lifestyle campaigns that was published in the year 2000, under the auspices of the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw). This organisation has regulated the implementation and quality control of such campaigns in the Netherlands since 1998. On the basis of the evaluation by ZonMw and of literature published more recently, the Committee concludes that mass media information campaigns have, at best, only a modest effect on behaviour. The occurrence of demonstrable effects was restricted to programmes in which mass media information campaigns were combined with other activities, such as changes in the target groups' environment. This does not detract from the fact that even a modest effect can make a difference, and that the form and content of mass media information campaigns should maximise the chances of achieving effects of this kind.

When implementing the requisite carefully planned campaign design, the following criteria and questions have to be taken into account:

- Carefully analyse the health problem in question, as well as any related behaviour, and the associated personal and environmental determinants: what evidence is there to show that the selected behaviours actually cause the problem, and what evidence is there to show that the selected determinants actually determine these behaviours?
- Formulate clear, exacting, and defensible targets: which specific determinants are being influenced, what desired behaviours (or behavioural components) in particular is this supposed to elicit, and which target groups are involved?
- Always combine mass media information campaigns with other types of interventions, such as environmental interventions, to remove barriers to healthy behaviour: what is the role of mass media information campaigns in the bigger picture of interventions targeting the same objective; also, does the use of other types of intervention render the desired behaviour easier and rewarding?
- Systematically apply any available knowledge, both theoretical and empirical, on how to influence behaviour: what evidence is there that the selected approach actually has the intended effect, and what is the theoretical basis for that effect?
- Change the target group's information environment: is there a positive response to the information campaign, does the campaign compete with other information, and does the campaign result in free publicity?
- Subject the campaign materials to experimental testing in advance: how sound is the prior evidence that the campaign materials will indeed produce the desired effect?
- Make use of new communication and information technology: is the campaign making the best possible use of the advanced capabilities of Internet and of other technological means, and do the developers possess the requisite expertise?

It is not the Committee's job to find out the extent to which current lifestyle campaigns actually conform to the quality criteria that it has specified. However, it is well aware of the importance of linking these and all future programmes to an appropriate evaluation study. In particular, there is a need for good-quality longitudinal research into the long-term effect of lifestyle campaigns.
