

## Paper 2: The impact of public health awareness campaigns

### Question

Do public health awareness campaigns effectively improve the awareness and quality of palliative care?

**This paper examines the impact of public health awareness campaigns on the public's awareness and quality of palliative care.**

### Summary

Awareness campaigns are organised communication activities designed to raise awareness, induce behaviour change and improve quality outcomes for individuals and populations (Masiulienė, 2015). Canadians are not fully aware of palliative care and the majority have not taken steps to manage their own future care through the use of personal directives. While it seems obvious that awareness needs to be raised, public health awareness campaigns require significant funding and not all are effective.

This review looks at public health awareness campaigns internationally and within Canada. It also looks at the effectiveness of various techniques in raising awareness and promoting engagement and the key features of successful campaigns.

- Review Findings Public awareness campaigns can improve awareness of palliative care and probably improve quality of care, but there is a lack of evidence about improving the quality of care.
- Canadians support a public awareness campaign aimed at making a difference in both awareness and the quality of palliative care.
- A campaign should use clear terminology, well piloted materials and a full range of mass media.
- Key factors for success include targeting, networking and evaluation.
- Existing campaigns tend not to be associated with detailed evaluations. Some also sell a particular stance, which risks stereotyping people.
- At a national level, short interventions with simple messages seem to work well.
- It is important to enable communities as most Canadians become aware through word of mouth. Some promising approaches give communities the social capital to engage with palliative care in their own terms and improve the quality of care locally.
- Social media is developing fast and shows promise as a relatively low cost means of awareness raising, but risks and unintended consequences need further study.
- Advance care planning helps people access palliative care and awareness raising is necessary. Materials should be culturally appropriate, piloted, engage the community in advance care planning and involve all age groups.
- Awareness campaigns can be evaluated by looking at reach; knowledge; service use; readiness to make decisions; comfort with illness/end of life or readiness to provide informal care.

## Implications

- A comprehensive public awareness campaign about palliative care (including advance care planning and end-of-life decision making) should be based on clear and shared terminology, use well piloted materials and the full range of mass media to suit different ages, cultures and religious/ spiritual perspectives. Key factors for success include: targeting, networking, SMART objectives; continuous evaluation and complementarity to national and international policy.
- Frail older people; first generation immigrants; and minority groups need special attention. Minority groups include ethnic minority groups and others, such as LGBT communities .
- Opportunities with the most potential for community engagement and action to improve palliative care at local, regional and national levels can be built into complex interventions to improve uptake of advance care planning or the quality of palliative care.
- Learning vicariously from experiences and stories of others features in many of the campaigns. Story telling may alleviate the reluctance of some people to engage with the material.
- Arts and humanities have a role to play in allowing individuals and communities to express experiences of illness, death, and grief; and encourage conversation and thoughtful reflection.
- There are a number of barriers/ issues to consider at the level of individuals, communities and systems of care e.g. literacy skills and unequal access to resources.
- Public awareness campaigns can be evaluated using mixed methods approaches to assess: reach; changes in knowledge; relationship to service use; impact on readiness to make decisions, comfort with contemplating future life limiting illness or end of life or readiness to provide informal care. Such studies can occur at local, regional or national levels. Impact will depend on the goals and objectives of the campaign.

## Recommended Readings

[Seymour, J.E., J. French, and E. Richardson, Dying matters: let's talk about it. BMJ, 2010. 341: p. c4860.](#)

[Gauvin, F.P. and J.N. Lavis, Evidence brief: Improving End-of-life Communication, Decisionmaking and Care in Ontario. 2013, McMaster Health Forum: Hamilton Canada.](#)