

Improving Health Literacy and Diabetes Management in a Portuguese-speaking Community through Weekly Comics

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OVERVIEW:

Health-literacy depends on a person's ability to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions (CDC, 2012). This poster describes a pilot project for diabetes education in which we integrate multiple aspects of health-literacy goals developed for an underserved, Portuguese-speaking community with high rates of diabetes. This project involved publishing tips for diabetics as comics in a free community newspaper weekly for one year.

BACKGROUND:

Fall River, Massachusetts is a small city with a population of approximately 88,000 people, located one hour south of Boston. About half (47%) of the population of Fall River can trace their ancestry to Portugal, giving it the largest Portuguese-American population in the United States. Among the Portuguese-Americans in Fall River there exists a strong community of recent immigrants, many of whom still primarily speak Portuguese, and whose families and communities remain culturally distinct. The prevalence of Diabetes in Fall River is disproportionately high: 11.3% of the population has diabetes, and 7.0% has pre-diabetes. In contrast, the prevalence of Diabetes in the United States in 2011 was 8.3%, and 9% in Southern Massachusetts (Ma DPH, 2011; NIH, 2011). Diabetes imposes a significant cost on communities; people with diagnosed diabetes incur an average yearly cost of \$11,744 in expenditures, \$6,649 of which is directly attributed to diabetes (Dall, 2007). Local physicians, diabetes educators and non-profit organizations in Fall River have had difficulty reaching the Portuguese-speaking population for diabetes education for many years.

IMPLICATIONS:

Improving health literacy and fostering positive change is critical to disease prevention in vulnerable populations. Visual communication is an under-utilized aspect of preventative health for community health outreach. Comics in newspapers are a low cost intervention, and can be used to access hard-to-reach populations and communities with low health literacy. This type of intervention can motivate positive health behaviors and actions, and educate not only the patient, but the community at-large and thus provide more equitable access to information.

IMPACT:

Community engagement/funding: Buy-in from community stakeholders has been key to our success in developing this intervention. The publishing costs total \$1,300 for one year of weekly tips in O Jornal. This amount is paid for by a local medical center, negotiated at the time of publication. In-kind donation of time/work is received by the artist, clinician collaborators, and a Portuguese language translator. Translation consultation services are also provided free of cost by the staff at O Jornal. Using the average estimated reach of O Jornal's readers, the cost of our intervention is approximately 6.5 cents per person.

Obtaining health information: O Jornal is a free newspaper widely read in Fall River and available in many public spaces throughout the city. Readership of this newspaper is thought to be approximately 20,000 people per week, and it is a trusted source of information in the Portuguese community of Fall River. By publishing in O Jornal, health tips are brought into the homes of all community members – not just those who have diabetes. Disbursing information in this way decreases several barriers to obtaining health information as it is not limited to insured patients and does not require scheduling an appointment.

Processing and understanding health information: Health literacy is a multidimensional construct, and is dependent on cultural differences (Shaw, 2009; Powell, 2012). Development and translation of text is critical to the effect of this project. Through the collaborative efforts of two clinicians, an illustrator, and a diabetes health educator, cultural-sensitivity and local perceptions of health and disease were incorporated into the weekly tips. Graphic medicine is a novel approach to improving health education and addressing goals of health literacy in communities.



The burden of diabetes in this community highlights the need to develop novel health interventions and approaches to health literacy. There is also a need to target not only diabetic patients, but also those in the greater community to educate friends and family who care for those with diabetes. With the knowledge that visual communication can significantly improve outcomes for those who are low-health literate, and using the health belief model of behavioral health change to inform the development of this project, we subsequently designed a project to deliver diabetes health tips.

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