

The power of beliefs – Can we change population behaviour and improve health by influencing beliefs?

Rachelle Buchbinder

What people believe about their illness can affect how both they and their doctors cope and deal with it. Over the past two decades, a widening gulf has emerged between illness presentation and the adequacy of traditional biomedical explanations. In an attempt to bridge this gap between illness and explanation without sacrificing the benefits of the biomedical approach, many health care professionals have begun to consider a biopsychosocial approach. One advantage of the biopsychosocial model is the fact the psychosocial influences in the form of beliefs have equal relevance for explaining and informing the behaviour and reasoning employed by healthcare professionals and those in wider society regarding aetiology of illness, recovery and potential for treatment.

One way of modifying the knowledge or attitudes of a large proportion of the community simultaneously is through the mass media. The mass media plays a potentially vital role in delivering health messages to the public. By reaching large numbers of people at the same time it may provide societal support for behavioural change.

This presentation will describe a media campaign that ran in the state of Victoria between 1997 and 1999, designed to alter general populations' attitudes and beliefs about back pain. The principal medium was a series of television advertisements featuring health professionals and well known sporting and TV personalities. The messages were simple: back pain is not a serious medical problem; disability can be improved and even prevented by positive attitudes; treatment should consist of continuing to perform usual activities, not resting for prolonged periods, exercising and remaining at work. We have shown that this campaign successfully altered population beliefs about back pain in line with current thinking, had a positive influence on doctors' knowledge and attitudes, and resulted in a reduction in costs related to compensable back pain. Despite cessation of the media campaign three years ago, we have also shown that the improvement in population beliefs about back pain has been sustained.

This suggests that health promotion campaigns can successfully change community and doctors' attitudes and beliefs and give rise to a concomitant alteration in patients' expectations and physicians' behaviour and ultimately improve health outcomes.