Public Information Training and Practices in 50 Oklahoma County Health Departments

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IF "health is a community affair" (*1, 2*) and "communication is as much a part of medicine as penicillin" (*3*), then the local health department should be the place to look for public information activity. Today we have radio as a companion, television brings immediacy in visual presentation, and newspapers give increasing attention to reporting in depth, but how qualified is the county health department staff to use these media? Are the public health professionals who are at the most crucial level of people-government well enough trained to hold to Jeffersonian standards in public education?

Thomas Jefferson fought for free public education and considered a free press necessary for an informed public opinion. He believed that people must be literate and must be given information about their government. In 1787, Jefferson wrote: "Give the people full information of their affairs through the public papers and contrive that those papers penetrate to the whole mass of the people" (*4*). Again, in 1820, he wrote: "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education" (*5*).

Attempts were made to answer the questions about the qualifications and training of local health personnel engaged in public information by analyzing the results of questionnaires returned by staffs of 50 county health departments in Oklahoma. Specifically, the research had four objectives.

1. To learn which persons in these county health

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The research was done in cooperation with the Oklahoma State Department of Health. Michael G. Metz of the Union Pacific Railroad's management information services helped in designing the study and in selecting a research pattern which would lend itself to eventual computer programming and use by public health or journalism students conducting similar studies.

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departments were responsible for supplying information for mass communications.

2. To learn which members of the county health department staffs (clerk, medical director, nurse, sanitarian, or other categorical health discipline) performed five primary public information functions.

3. To learn what journalism education or experience staff members of county health departments brought to mass communications work in public health. (Nine kinds of training were explored.)

4. To relate the journalism background of the county health department staff to the department's public information activity.

Methods

After a pretest mailing in Oklahoma to county health departments of various sizes of staff, questionnaires were addressed to the balance. The questionnaire sought facts on each department's public information activity during fiscal year 1969. Tulsa and Oklahoma City, the only city-county health departments and the only departments with staffs of more than 100 persons, were then excluded as not comparable. Including the pretest mailing, 42 (72 percent) of the 59 questionnaires, which had all been addressed to medical directors, were returned.

Upon advice of a private physician who had worked in public health, a second mailing to the 17 health departments not responding was addressed to these departments' clerks, by name. Ten of the 17 departments then responded, bringing the total to 50 departments, divided into four sizes of staff ranging from 4 to 50 employees.

The clerk in a county health department in Oklahoma serves as a receptionist, handles mail, acts as stenographer for the staff, prepares statistical reports, and maintains records. In State personnel directories, the position is listed as "secretary." In my study, if the employee had advanced to the position of administrative assistant and had the college education to warrant it, the position was classified under "others—professional," along with social workers, and so forth.

The questionnaire was designed to determine the job categories of the staff members performing the five primary public information functions of staff coordination, program planning, news reporting, news writing, and public speaking. The job categories listed on the questionnaire were those of clerk, medical director, nurse, sanitarian, and other ("other" being divided into professional and nonprofessional personnel).

The study was limited to data from the questionnaires and consisted of responses signed by one or more staff members of each county health department, including in each instance the medical director. While followup by interviews would have provided more validity for the study, a measure of confirmation of the questionnaire data was obtained by having the summary of results and the tables reviewed by both the public information officer and the public health educator of the Oklahoma State Department of Health. These officials found nothing in the summary or tables that was at variance with their knowledge of county activities. They were interested to discover that some of their assumptions about the information activities of county health departments were borne out but agreed that further research in other States is needed.

To provide information on the journalism background of each staff member engaged in a public information activity, respondents were asked to indicate the staff member's training from these nine categories—high school or college newspaper, college journalism courses, commercial newspaper, radio, television, journalism degree (BS or BA), national voluntary agency, and short course or workshop in journalism.

Twelve public information activities were selected to serve as indicators of such activity, and the 50 counties were compared as to whether they—

budgeted for information services
designated a specific coordinator for staff work in public information
planned the public information program
wrote copy for newspaper or radio
contacted news media regularly
published clinic and immunization schedules regularly
had their own newspaper columns, radio programs, or television spots
reported to newspapers, radio, or television the talks given by staff members
followed up State health department releases with relevant local facts
maintained a system for analysis and evaluation of media response
had knowledge of available free-lance writers
provided public health newsletters or professional publications with articles by the staff

The 50 health departments were ranked accord-

Table 1. Personnel in public information work in 50 county health departments in Oklahoma, by job category

Job category	Total in category in 50 counties	In public information	
		Number	Percent
Sanitarians	76	52	68
Medical directors	50	30	60
Nurses	152	78	51
Clerks	88	26	29
Others	121	30	25
Professionals [1]	38	15	39
Nonprofessionals	83	15	18
Total	487	216	44

[1] Includes 9 dentists, none of whom were reported as participating in public information activity.

ing to the number of the 12 selected informational indicators (activities in which each had engaged), as reported in responses to the questionnaire. A median for the 12 indicators was then determined, and the departments were compared on the basis of this median. Any possibly significant relationships in journalism or public health administration were noted.

As the following table shows, half of the 50 departments engaged in six or less of the 12 activities, while the other half engaged in seven or more.

Number of health departments	*Number of activities*
3	1
1	2
5	3
5	4
8	5
3	6
Median	6.5
7	7
5	8
8	9
3	10
1	11
1	12

Taking the arithmetic mean of the two central numbers, 6 and 7, the median indicator for public information activities for the 50 county health departments was determined to be 6.5 (*6*).

The 216 persons with public information responsibility in the 50 county health departments were analyzed for job classification (table 1). A greater number of nurses, but a larger percentage of sanitarians, than members of any other job categories were engaged in informational activity.

Job classifications of the 216 persons with information functions were analyzed in relation to size of the health department staff (table 2). Regardless of staff size, more nurses than personnel in other job categories had informational functions. As health departments increased their staffs and added professionals (for example, social workers and public health trained administrative assistants), participation in public information functions by the medical director, in particular, and, to a lesser degree, by all staff members, decreased.

Table 3 shows the number and percentage of the staff members in the 50 health departments who were performing five selected public information functions, according to their job categories. All five of the functions were performed by some members of each personnel category, except that there were no nonprofessionals in the "others" category who were coordinating their staff's public information efforts. When participation in the five functions was totaled for the 50 departments, the proportion of participants was highest among the sanitarians. A higher proportion of clerks than members of any other job category were serving as coordinators of information activity. Nurses wrote more newspaper and radio copy. "Other—professionals" and nurses gave more speeches to public groups.

In table 4, the kinds of journalism training of the 216 persons engaged in public information are analyzed for job category. Compared with sanitarians, nurses, medical directors, and nonprofes-

Table 2. Personnel in public information work in 50 county health departments in Oklahoma, by job category and size of health department staff

Job category	On health department staffs of—			
	4–6 [1]	7–10 [2]	11–20 [3]	21–50 [4]
Medical directors	10	10	6	4
Clerks	8	9	7	2
Nurses	19	26	22	11
Sanitarians	12	16	17	7
Others	5	11	9	5
Professionals	0	3	7	5
Nonprofessionals	5	8	2	0
Total participating in public information	54	72	61	29
Percent of personnel participating in public information	67	50	38	27

[1] 16 departments; total personnel 80.
[2] 19 departments; total personnel 144.
[3] 11 departments; total personnel 159.
[4] 4 departments; total personnel 104.

sional auxiliary workers, larger percentages of "other—professionals" and clerks had journalism training. Far greater numbers of sanitarians than members of other categories, however, had taken college journalism courses. Twenty percent of the 216 staff members with information responsibilities had high school or college newspaper experience.

The public information activity of the health departments of four staff sizes are compared in table 5, using the 12 selected indicators of such activity. The average number of activities was found to be six in departments with staffs of four to six persons; five in departments with staffs of seven to 10; and nine in departments with staffs of 21 to 50.

Several aspects of the public information activities of the 50 county health departments were compared, using the median of 6.5. Two of the correlations thus derived are especially pertinent to public health administration and to informational efforts in public health.

First, of the 25 departments reporting that at least one person on the staff had experienced one or more of the nine kinds of journalism training, 17 departments ranked above the median and eight ranked below it. Of the 25 departments indicating they had no one on the staff with any of the nine selected kinds of journalism training listed, only nine ranked above the median; 16 were below it.

The second pertinent correlation is between the position held by the person coordinating a health department staff's public information activities and the ranking of that person's department in respect to the median for such activities. In the

Table 3. Use of the 216 county health staff members engaged in public information in 5 public information functions, by job category

Number in public information	Coordinates staff [1]		Helps plan		Reports news		Writes news		Gives talks	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
26 clerks	8	31	18	69	20	77	8	31	4	15
30 medical directors	6	20	23	76	9	30	10	33	10	33
78 nurses	12	15	36	46	42	54	31	39	67	86
52 sanitarians	8	15	34	65	31	60	20	38	44	84
30 others:										
15 professionals	2	14	11	73	4	27	4	27	13	87
15 nonprofessionals	0	0	15	100	1	.06	2	13	4	27
Total in 50 health departments	36	95	37	70	107	49	75	35	142	67

[1] 31 of 50 County health departments designated at least 1 coordinator; 7 departments designated 2.

Table 4. Journalism training or experience of the 216 staff members engaged in public information for 50 Oklahoma county health departments, by members' job category

Training or experience	Number in job category with training or experience						
	Other—professionals	Clerks	Sanitarians	Nurses	Medical directors	Other—nonprofessionals	All 6 categories
High school newspaper	6	4	7	11	2	2	32
College newspaper	5	1	1	1	1	0	9
College journalism course	2	1	14	1	0	0	18
Commercial newspaper	0	2	0	0	0	1	3
Radio experience	1	1	2	0	1	0	5
Television experience	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
BS or BA in journalism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
National voluntary agency	2	7	1	10	1	0	21
Journalism short course or workshop	1	3	0	7	3	0	14
Number of persons [1]	7	10	17	20	4	3	61
Percent of staffs in job category [2]	46	38	33	25	13	15	28

[1] Total staff members in the 50 county health departments, from the various job categories, engaged in public information, who had 1 or more of the 9 kinds of journalism training. These totals are smaller than the actual totals for each job category because staff members often had more than 1 kind of training or experience.

[2] Percent of information staff members in category with 1 or more of the 9 kinds of journalism training.

Table 5. Twelve indicators of the public information activity of 50 county health departments in Oklahoma, by size of staffs

Public information activity indicators	Departments with staffs of—				Total	
	4–6	7–10	11–20	21–50	Number	Percent
Budgets for information	11	10	9	3	33	66
Designates coordinator	11	10	6	4	31	62
Plans program	11	13	8	3	35	70
Staff writes copy	6	10	9	4	28	56
Contacts media regularly	11	8	4	4	27	54
Publishes clinic and immunization schedules regularly	9	7	3	3	22	44
Newspaper column or broadcast program; spot	1	2	2	1	6	12
Reports staff talks to press	7	11	9	4	31	62
Follows up on State health releases	9	8	6	3	26	52
Evaluates media response	11	8	7	3	29	58
Knows or does not know of free-lance writers	6	2	4	2	14	28
Staff uses publications	8	7	6	3	24	48
Total indicators	110	96	73	37	307	..
Average number of indicators	6	5	7	9	6	..
Median number of indicators	7	5	7	9.5	6.5	..

NOTE: As explained in the Methods section, the median for each group and for the State (50 counties) was tabulated by listing each county health department according to the number of its activity indicators.

eight departments in which the clerk served as coordinator, seven were above the median. In the eight departments in which the sanitarian was responsible for coordination, six were above it. In the 12 departments in which the nurse was responsible for coordination, nine were above it. In the six departments whose public information activities were coordinated by the medical director, only three were above the median.

Discussion

Other indicators than the 12 chosen might have been used in scoring the public information activities of the 50 health departments. The particular activities selected are not necessarily needed by every health department to obtain effective community response. It is significant that 40 percent of the departments studied engaged in from seven to nine of the 12 informational activities selected as indicators. Less than 20 percent engaged in only one, two, or three of these activities.

Although the five functions selected are not mandatory in evaluating an employee's participation in public information, they are very revealing. In my conference with the State public information officer and the State public health educator, I questioned whether 100 percent of the nonprofessionals on the county health department staffs would have actually participated in public information planning. These officials explained that during 1969 there had been statewide promotion of staff participation in program planning with the health board and consumers. They were not surprised that all of the 15 nonprofessional auxiliary staff members who were engaged in public information had helped to plan their county health departments' public information activities.

Public health educators will be encouraged to learn that 70 percent of the county health departments surveyed planned their public information programs, 66 percent budgeted for information services, 62 percent designated a specific coordinator for information activities, and 62 percent reported to the local press the talks made by their staff members.

Public health educators will be concerned that almost half of the personnel in county health departments engage in information activities, but that as departments grow in size and employ other professionals, fewer staff members perform informational functions.

Comments on the questionnaires suggest that members of health staffs believe that employing a health educator would solve all their public information problems. Such employment, however, should not remove from the medical director, sanitarian, nurse, clerk, or others the responsibility for contributing to the objectives of the public information program. As public health educators continue to redefine their roles (*7*) and as health staffs arrive at a better understanding of the role of the health educator, the use of personnel from all job categories should improve public information efforts (*8*).

The only county health department with a staff of 21 to 50 members to fall below the median for information activity was one that had no budget for information. The medical director coordinated the public information activity in this health department, and no one on the staff had any journalism training.

Mytinger has shown, in a study of California county health departments, that lack of funds is frequently given as a reason for the failure to establish new health programs. Using accident prevention activities as an example, he points out, however, that "Since those presently planning to adopt accident prevention activities do not seem to see lack of funds as an obstacle, one must wonder whether the problem of funds is real or imagined—a convenient excuse to those who have not carried their desires into the planning stage" (*9*). To some extent, Oklahoma county health departments that did not budget for information had less information activity. Of 17 departments having no budgets for this purpose, 13 fell below the median for information activity. Of 33 departments that budgeted for information services, only 12 fell below the median.

Nevertheless, planning for public information did not seem to be as closely related to budgeting for it as might be assumed. Of the 17 departments with no budgets for information, 12 planned public information programs, 11 designated specific coordinators, and 10 reported staff members' talks to newspapers.

Sanitarians will probably not be surprised that the study showed them carrying much responsibility for public information at the local level. Long before DDT, they were telling people why they must swat the fly. Yet, despite more college journalism training among sanitarians, nurses generally wrote the copy for newspapers and radio. The reasons for this result would be interesting to explore.

County health departments which contacted the media regularly were higher in total public information activity. Of 27 departments contacting the press regularly, 22 were above the median for information activities. Of 23 contacting the media irregularly, only four were above the median.

The medical director in one health department of the smaller size staff enlisted the local newspaper publisher, a county health board member, to serve as public information coordinator for the health department. This department succeeded in getting clinic immunization schedules published regularly—an effort in which less than half of the 50 counties were successful. Public information activities requiring staff initiative, however, were lacking in this health department, and its total score on public information activity was below the median for the 50 departments.

In journalism circles, such a working agreement between a government official and a publisher would be debatable. In a democracy with a free press, the propriety of such a situation is worthy of discussion by public health and newspaper personnel. Dialog between physicians and reporters has in the past produced some guidelines helpful to professionals in both fields (*10*).

It is in the area of responsibility for accurate and full reporting to the public that a journalist is judged to be a professional. Much of the training reported in the Oklahoma study was not at this level, but related more to the mechanics of news writing.

The result showing that 20 percent of the county health personnel engaging in public information had experience on school newspapers will probably surprise journalism teachers at both the high school and college level. It might challenge them to teach more than the mere mechanics of their subject and to show how the press can help promote community health, yet not interfere with its historic role of serving as a critic of government. These teachers will find it significant also that the county health departments in which even one person on the staff had some journalism background were more likely to achieve a broad range of public information activity in public health than departments in which no one had any such education or experience.

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A survey of 50 county health departments in Oklahoma having four to 50 staff members revealed that 44 percent of the members participated in public information activities. As staffs grew in size and as professionals (such as social workers and public health trained administrative assistants) were hired, the participation of other staff members, especially of medical directors, decreased.

A higher percentage of sanitarians than any other job class were found to be engaged in five primary public information functions, based on total participation in all 50 counties. A higher percentage of clerks than members of any other job class served as coordinators of information. "Others — professionals" and nurses spoke more to public groups.

"Others — professionals" and clerks had more journalism training than sanitarians, nurses, medical directors, or nonprofessional auxiliary workers. Twenty percent of the public health staff members with informational duties had high school or college newspaper experience.

Twelve selected public information activities were used as indicators to score and compare the county health departments. The median for the 50 counties provided a basis for correlating a health department's public information activity with the journalism training of its personnel.

Health departments with even one person on the staff who had some journalism background achieved a broader range of public information activities than those having no staff member trained or experienced in journalism.