

Some Guidelines for Conducting a Health Fair

NICHOLAS D. RICHIE, PhD

HEALTH FAIRS are events that health professionals and agencies are increasingly being asked to participate in, or conduct. Unfortunately, the dearth of published information on how to put on such events leaves the novice pretty much to his or her own devices. Yet reliance on a trial and error approach can be inefficient and frustrating. To alleviate some of the difficulties that newcomers encounter in setting up such affairs, some guidelines from my own experience with a health fair are offered.

Purpose of Fair

It will help those conducting a health fair if they first clarify their purposes for holding it. A clear statement of objectives can provide focus when decisions must be made among several alternatives. If the fair's objectives have been defined, its sponsors will be less likely to be sidetracked and end up with a disjointed event—a fair that is ineffective because it lacks coherence and integrity.

In determining the purposes a health fair should serve, it is probably best to first try to assess the overall health needs of the community in which the event is to take place—the needs, in other words, to which the fair would be expected to contribute. Park Forest South, Ill., is the community where I had my first experience with a health fair. I was a member of the health planning committee of this new model city that is being built upon former farmland 35 miles south of Chicago. The main goals of the committee (which was composed of consumers and health professionals) were to assess local health needs, attempt to attract health facilities and professionals to the area, and make the town's health-related problems known to the areawide comprehensive health planning "b" agency in Joliet.

As a new town under construction, Park Forest South had no physicians' offices, clinics, or hospitals at the

time. Other health-related facilities and personnel were also lacking. In addition, many of the new residents were not familiar with the existing health care facilities elsewhere in the suburban area south of Chicago. Consequently, the health planning committee considered it imperative to do something about the situation, and it proposed a health fair as a way of addressing these concerns. In an attempt to broaden the base of support for the project, the Service League of Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center South was invited to cosponsor the event. The Service League had distinguished itself by a lengthy effort to gain support and financing for a satellite hospital in Park Forest South, which would be part of the Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's complex in Chicago.

Consequently, based on the assumption that the need for such a community health endeavor was self-evident, a health fair entitled Health Expo 73 was held on September 8, 1973, cosponsored by the two groups just discussed. In keeping with what were perceived to be the needs of the community, the objectives of the fair were therefore (a) to bring health care providers and health care consumers together—making providers aware of community needs and consumers aware of community health resources, (b) to distribute health information of various kinds, including a directory of area health services, and (c) to offer some direct health services, for instance, immunizations and diagnostic testing. Depending upon local needs, the purposes for conducting a health fair may differ from community to community, but the three mentioned are probably relevant to most communities. Other community factors that may affect one's goals and the way in which they are achieved through the mechanism of a health fair include the age of the community and the extent to which there already are established health patterns and agencies in it that may limit, or expand, the fair's scope and also the size of the community. In larger communities, it may be necessary for the health fair to be arranged on a neighborhood level rather than involve the entire community.

Timing of Fair

The time of the year and the day of the week that a fair is held will affect attendance. Summer months should generally be avoided because many people are likely to be away on vacation. In areas where winters are severe,

Dr. Richie is now assistant professor, graduate program in health and hospital administration, J. Hillis Miller Health Center, University of Florida. At the time of the health fair on which this paper is based, Dr. Richie was professor of health science, Governors State University, Park Forest South, Ill. Tearsheet requests to Dr. Nicholas D. Richie, Box J-195, J. Hillis Miller Health Center, University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla. 32610.

the winter season should also be avoided, since travel at that time can be difficult and hazardous, especially for children and the elderly.

In a suburban community with many young families, weekdays probably should be avoided because working fathers and mothers are likely to be unable to attend or to accompany their young children. In such cases, Saturdays or weekends may be appropriate times to hold a fair. In a community composed primarily of retired persons, however, a weekday event may be appropriate. The point is that in deciding when to hold a fair, consideration needs to be given to the geography and demography of the particular community for which the event is planned.

Site Selection

The site selected for the fair should be one that is relatively accessible by both public and private transportation, as well as by foot. In addition, it should have ample parking space, and both indoor and outdoor exhibition areas. If a well-known public building is used, it can assist visitors in readily locating the fair. Many suburban communities have been holding health fairs at shopping centers lately. Since Park Forest South did not yet have a shopping center at the time of Health Expo 73, an educational institution was chosen. A centrally located grammar school that was well known to the community was selected as the site. Its large indoor gymnasium area, small separate rooms, and parking lot made it an ideal setting. Educational institutions are generally adaptable to such events.

Financing a Fair

Unless the organizations sponsoring the health fair have unlimited funds, at an early stage in the planning, careful thought needs to be given as to how the event is to be financed. First, the assets of the sponsoring agencies should be determined. Then, if these assets are insufficient, some thought should be given to soliciting businessmen in the community who might have an interest in the project, for example, pharmacists. In Park Forest South, we approached the public relations director for a local land development and construction firm for funds to publish and distribute a directory of area health services in conjunction with the health fair. The director, believing that presentation of the directory to potential buyers and new residents would help in the sale of homes in the area, agreed that his firm would underwrite the considerable printing costs for the publication (1).

Another potential source of funding is in the sale of refreshments by the fair's sponsors. Besides affording an opportunity to raise funds to help defray costs, refreshments are likely to be welcomed by most visitors and staff since they need an occasional break. You may, however, need a permit from the local health authorities.

Inviting Agencies to Participate

My experience suggests that health-related agencies will be beating a path to your door to participate in a health fair once word gets out that one is being planned. Since sponsors may have to turn down some prospective participants because of space limitations, the basis for selection of participants should be decided in advance. The fair's sponsors need to come to a common understanding of what is encompassed by the word "health" before they start making these selections. Such an understanding will help avoid internal feuding over the relevance of the participation of agency X, facility Y, or organization Z. For instance, if a broad working definition of health is adopted, then the fair might include exhibits on safety, environmental pollution, and the like. If, on the other hand, a narrower definition of health and a narrower purpose for holding the fair are agreed upon, such exhibits may be inappropriate.

Another factor to take into account when selecting participants is that a number of issues in health care are controversial. The sponsors will need to decide in advance if they are able and willing to contend with the controversy that is likely to arise if certain agencies participate, or if certain services are offered. For instance, there has been considerable criticism recently of mass sickle-cell testing (2). Also, in view of the debate currently raging over abortion, the sponsors of a health fair who invite an organization representing one side of this issue without also inviting representatives of the opposite persuasion would risk heavy criticism from the uninvited.

On a more positive note, I would recommend that every effort be made to engage the nearby public health departments—city, county, and so forth—in the enterprise. These departments may be able to schedule some of their immunizations and other programs to coincide with the date of the fair. Even if this is not possible, the activities of such departments are generally so varied that they can probably provide major input to the event. Many health departments can offer immunizations (for diphtheria, measles, mumps, pertussis, and tetanus), hearing and vision testing, displays on dental health, and air and water pollution analysis.

One other word in regard to participants. Be sure that they have malpractice liability coverage if they are to provide a medical service of some kind at the fair. You may want to request verification in writing of this coverage. In addition, sponsors of the fair should themselves have liability coverage for the period of the fair—in the event that they do not have a blanket policy covering all their activities. In the case of some insurance policies, a rider may be obtained for the day of the fair. At any rate, sponsors are advised to check with a lawyer in advance of the fair about prudent liability coverage, especially in this day of increasingly frequent lawsuits aimed at health practitioners.

Publicity for the Fair

The best organized health fair will accomplish little of value if people do not come. Encouragement of attendance then should be a major concern of the fair's sponsors. Media coverage, however, can at times be expensive, and the sponsoring organizations may not have sufficient funds for this purpose. The sponsors' resources will then need to be used for the advertising media most likely to draw the largest crowds. Unfortunately, we had limited funds for publicizing our fair in Park Forest South and even more limited knowledge as to which media would be most effective in the community. Consequently, we decided to try them all to some degree: personal contacts—participants would inform friends, relatives, coworkers, and so forth; flyers—distributed door to door in the community; newspaper articles written by reporters who had been invited to planning sessions; a radio interview; several spot announcements on television; posters in local stores and schools; a sound truck covering the community on the day of the fair; and written notices that school children were to take home to their parents.

Subsequently, an attempt was made to assess the effectiveness of these various communications mechanisms (through a questionnaire filled out by visitors as they left the fair), with a view to using the most effective ones in publicizing future events of this kind. In Park Forest South, personal contacts proved to be the most effective means of attracting visitors, followed by flyers delivered to the residents' homes and then by newspaper stories.

Attracting Children

Unless a health fair is aimed solely at the elderly or some other adult group, its sponsors will probably want to give special attention to attracting children to the fair, especially in a suburban community populated largely by young families. If you can attract young children, their parents are also likely to come. In fact, if the children who want to attend are very young, their parents or another adult will need to accompany them.

It is thus desirable to have activities (for example, puppet shows and animated cartoons with health themes) and celebrities at the fair who will appeal to children. Although many of the celebrities in sports, television, the theater, and the movies who would attract children may have personal appearance fees that the fair sponsors will not be able to meet, the sponsors still may be able to locate a celebrity willing to donate his or her time or who will be willing to come for a moderate fee (particularly if the person has, or has had, a well-publicized illness or disability that has led to a personal interest in promoting health education).

Also, some local merchant may be willing to underwrite the costs of such an appearance. For the fair in Park Forest South, the manager of three restaurants

that are part of a well-known national chain donated the services of a clown character used in the corporation's nationwide advertising, who is easily recognized by most children. Much advance publicity was directed at his appearance and when a number of children arrived at the fair, they asked, "Where's _____?"

Another way of attracting children to the fair is to actively involve them in the event. In regard to Health Expo 73, school children were invited to prepare posters advertising the fair, and they were also used to distribute printed notices to their parents. Teenagers from the community were invited to prepare and staff an exhibit at the fair (they selected one on physical fitness that was extremely popular) and to assist with traffic control in the parking lot.

Physical Layout of Fair

In determining the physical layout for a fair, it helps to draw a map of the available area. Then, by using paper or cardboard cutouts to represent the various exhibits, one can try to determine the most efficient arrangement for the exhibits before setting up the actual ones, most of which are bulky and heavy.

A few well-placed directional signs at various points in the community, posted with the permission of the local police department and the department of public works, will help visitors find the fair site. In addition, for both safety and convenience, designated persons should be available to assist in controlling traffic in the parking areas for visitors. The local police department may be willing to provide this service.

If films and other audiovisual materials are available, as well as theatrical skits and puppet shows, it is helpful to set aside a separate room for them, posting a sign near the door of the room to indicate at what time each event will be presented. A separate room or area is also recommended for some other fair activities, such as immunizations and the collection of blood specimens—preferably one with running water nearby. Throughout the main exhibit area, signs should be placed to direct people to restrooms, refreshments, fire exits, and to any parts of the fair not in the main exhibition area. Each individual exhibit or activity, of course, should also be identified with a sign.

In addition, consideration should be given to putting signs outdoors if the fair is to be held primarily inside a building. Some exhibits, moreover, may lend themselves to an outdoor setting, for example, testing for air pollution and bicycle safety inspections. Certain exhibits in fact may require outdoor display, such as the mobile health education vans used by a number of health-related agencies and the exhibit of emergency medical care vehicles.

Giveaways

Almost everyone likes to get free items, especially in these times of rising inflation. The popularity of the exhibit

booths at the 1974 annual meeting of the American Public Health Association in New Orleans, La., suggested to me that there is probably little distinction between health professionals and laymen in this regard. Booths at the New Orleans meeting offered such gladly accepted "freebies" as soup, cookbooks, rulers, buttons, and carbonated beverages. Consequently, I would recommend that efforts be made to procure as many giveaways as possible for distribution at a health fair. In addition to the health literature distributed at such events, fair sponsors can contact local merchants (banks, for instance) who frequently distribute favors to customers, as well as local and national manufacturers of health-related products, to obtain free samples or donations. Since visitors may find this material cumbersome to carry around in their hands, a carrier for this purpose would undoubtedly be welcomed. The public affairs office of the Blue Cross-Blue Shield Association in Chicago has donated plastic shopping bags (emblazoned with the organizational emblem) for distribution at health fairs, which are ideal for this purpose. Since there may be differences of opinion among participating health agencies regarding the appropriateness of distributing giveaways with commercial advertising, it is recommended that the fair's sponsors clarify in advance (as we did in Park Forest South) whether any of the participants consider the proposed activity offensive or unethical.

Evaluating the Fair

As with any effort of this magnitude, some attempt should be made at evaluation. This evaluation can take the form of written feedback, oral feedback, or both, from the participating agencies, sponsors, and visitors. It might include counts of the number of visitors and tabulations of the number of services supplied, such as immunizations. The feedback might also be based upon data collected from the fair visitors themselves by means of short questionnaires that they could answer quickly before leaving the fair site. For example, questions might be directed at providing information to help the sponsors evaluate the fair and plan future ones (such as questions about residence of the visitor, how visitor learned about the fair, composition of visitor's family). Other questions might seek to determine what the visitors considered their greatest health care needs. This information, when shared with local health planning and health-related agencies could be of considerable value. An indication might be sought as to which events or services appealed most to the visitors. We conducted such a survey of more than 20 percent of the fair's 1,500 visitors as they left the fair, and discovered that direct services like immunization and diagnostic testing were the most popular. Once the information from such questionnaires has been tabulated, it should be incorporated into a final report on the fair and distributed to participating agencies and

other appropriate audiences. The community itself, however, provided the sponsors of Health Expo 73 with the strongest endorsement of the value of the event by undertaking to repeat the fair themselves, under the sponsorship of a local fraternal group, just 6 months later.

Thanking Fair Participants

An event such as a health fair entails a great deal of work on the part of the participants, and each participant should be thanked both individually and publicly. The publicly expressed appreciation might take the form of a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. One reason for treating the participants well is that they will then be more likely to participate in such an event, or a similar one, on a future occasion. As communities grow and the local population and its health care needs change, it may be necessary to hold other health fairs at appropriate intervals.

Recording the Fair

To assist in planning future events of a similar nature, it is wise for the sponsors to retain records of all correspondence, plans, names and addresses of participants, bills, and so forth—or better yet, to prepare a final report covering these and other matters in detail. Advanced arrangements for professional photographs to be taken at the fair will add interest to the final report, assist in post-fair publicity in newspapers and related media, and refresh the sponsors' memories as to various details when a similar event is undertaken subsequently.

Summary

Health professionals are being asked with increasing frequency to participate in, or to conduct, health fairs. There is, however, a lack of published practical advice available to persons undertaking such an event for the first time. Based upon my experience in this area, participants are advised to (a) clearly define in advance the objectives to be achieved by this activity, (b) give careful attention to the timing, location, and financing of the event, (c) encourage the active participation in the event of both professionals and lay persons in the community, (d) pay particular attention to publicizing the event, since the fair's success will be directly related to visitor attendance, and (e) evaluate the event to determine whether the sponsors' objective were met, whether additional health fairs should be conducted, and what changes should be made when similar events are held in the future.

References

1. Bateson, J., and Richie, N. D., editors: A directory of health services for Park Forest South and the South Suburbs. New Community Enterprises, Park Forest South, Ill., Sept. 8, 1973.
2. Powledge, T. M.: The new ghetto hustle. *Saturday Rev Sci* 1: 38-47, February 1973.