

# Public Relations in Health Care

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## SUMMARY

The authors analyze how public relations can help health care institutions in communicating with the target population. Authors among the first define public relations in health care. For them, public relations in the health care is communication process of health institutions (hospitals, primary health care centers, etc.) with its internal and external public, in order to achieve mutual respect, understanding and achieving mutual interests. In this paper, the authors also provide practical advice of seven points which health institutions should do to build successful public relations and communication with internal and external public, and improve its image in the public.

**Key words: public relations, healthcare, public communications, media, relations with the media**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of *relations with public* represents communication activity which in English is called *public relations* or PR for short. It is believed that this term was used first in the U.S., from where its use spread to other countries. Public relations today are present in almost all areas of life. One such area is the area of health. Health is today without doubt one of the most important areas of social activity. As such it is exposed to the numerous critics. The image of doctors and health institutions in the public is not even close to what health professionals wanted. Various health institutions are shaken by the affairs associated with corruption and bribes. Doctors are linked to the stereotype that they are people who have extremely low ability for good and effective communication with its public. To this should be added also the low awareness of management to recruit communication professionals in their institutions.

From all the ministries in the government of Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Health is one of the last ones that appointed spokesman, or office for public relations. In accordance with the belated "awareness" almost none of the hospitals in Zagreb have a person in charge of public relations and spokesperson. If you want to talk to anyone in Zagreb hospitals, you will be greeted by the secretary to inform you that only the director can give information to the media. This fact can lead to the conclusion that in the Croatian health care all is perfect. However, a number of scandals suggest unfortunately just the opposite image.

This is a picture of Croatia and the region. The data indicate that even in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Western countries the situation a little more positive. Situation in health improves every day to a level that no one has yet met. Previous models of care included physicians who provide medical treatment while they are now replaced by the health care teams that promote a certain measure of security.

## 2. DEFINING PUBLIC RELATIONS

Today, in literature there are several hundred usable definitions of the term public relations. The most effective way to begin to understand what the public relations are is by defining the term. Many institutions, institutes, authors and individuals have their own definitions of public relations. Regardless of the number of these definitions they all have certain common characteristics.

*American Association for Public Affairs*, known by short PRSA in November 1982 said that public relations helps our complex, diverse society in decision-making and allow it to function efficiently, so that it contributes to the achievement of mutual understanding between the institution (organization) and their environment (target group).

James Grunig and Todd Hunt in the famous article *Managing Public Relations* (1984) defined public relations as "managing communications between the organization and its public." This at first glance is quite simple definition but perhaps best reflects the essence of public relations. (1)

Doctor Zoran Tomic defines public relations as the process of communicating with its internal organization and external public relations to achieve mutual understanding build social responsibility and achieve common interests. (2)

If a more detailed insight is made into these and many other definitions of public relations, it is evident that relations with the public are dealing with communication. In fact, hundreds of definitions of PR even now largely come down to communication, which is basically the essence of public relations.

Public relations are the process of communicating with its public organizations to achieve mutual understanding and realization of common interests.

In line with this approach, we have a new, simple definition of public relations, which say: Public Relations are *communication* of organizations (hospitals) with its public.

Using further on key words still can be decoded the word *public*. As for the public relations term general public is almost irrelevant, PR public should be divided into internal and external public. Statement about the importance of public understanding on the *internal* and *external* can reach to something concrete “help” of relations with public and healthcare.

### 3. DEFINING THE PUBLIC

The first and very important task for the public relations officer and the entire organization (the hospital) is the definition of the public. The concept of the public (French–Publique, German–Öffentlichkeit or öffentlich) has its origin from the Latin word publicus. “The early use of the word was to recognize the two basic meanings: one is included in the term *res publica*, and its applicable to general availability, openness and accessibility to the people, in terms of public place; in the second case the term is associated with matters of general interest or even more specific with the official and public affairs.” (3)

Although the concept of the public is subjected to various interpretations, for Cutlip A. Center and G. Broom public is “a mosaic made up of different ethical, racial, religious, geographical political, professional, social and other groups, each of which should be taken into account”. (4)

Philip Kotler in his book Marketing Management believes that “the public may present some potential buyers of products of the company, current users, decision-makers or those that affect the decision. Public may be represent by individuals, groups of people or society in a broader sense”. (5)

### 4. INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PUBLIC

Defining the public should start by “isolating” the internal and external public. Taking into account the broad public health sector such as what internal public of one hospital can do: patients, physicians/colleagues, medical personnel, families of patients, the administration of the hospital, hospital departments, hospital unions, Ministry of Health, School of Medicine and others. Relations with the public after defining the internal public starts to define external public of one hospital or clinic. External public can be: media, opinion makers, associations/societies, city government, county or local government, county health organizations, EU/WHO, universities, etc.

Defining internal and external public helps us to better understand the concepts of health and public relations, but also to connect them in a “new definition”. In line with this view, public relations in the health communication process of health institutions (hospitals, primary health care centers, etc.) with its internal and external public to achieve mutual respect, understanding and mutual interests.

### 5. PUBLIC RELATIONS IN HEALTH CARE

Health is often described as a complex job in an unsafe future. The practice of public relations in health care has

changed together with the dramatic changes in health care. In some sense, public relations in health care are not particularly different by public relations in any other industry given that the overall objective of the public relations is still to “match long-term relationships” and “manage reputation,” according to L. Traynowicz -Hetherington, D. Ekachai and M. Parkinson work in *Public Relations in the Health Care Industry*. (6)

However, as wrote Traynowicz-Hetherington et al., healthcare is a unique industry. Some theorists argue that the medicine is different than any other industry because of thing on its disposal (life, death and recovery), rapid and profound changes in the health system and the communication between the client (or patient) and suppliers (supplier of health care within the defined system).

The motivation for improving health care industry is not only focused to the cost reduction—which is a universal principle known in other industries. The desire for progress of health care processes is motivated by the supplier that seeks to improve the quality of care in the best possible way. Therefore, employees of public relations who are responsible for promoting, improving and reversal of the overall system in the health industry must know subtly different motivation to get the motivation to care for the human being. (6)

Viewed through the history of public relations in health care “good time” of health PR was between the 1950 and 1960. During this time, practitioners in public relations in the health care felt little need to create awareness and preference for health care because health care organizations have always had the support and sympathy of the public. PR did not have to be particularly active in order to “maintain and build public confidence.” Rather, the role of public relations were attributed and limited to the communication of the information and positive image. However, during the 1970 there was a shift in the expression in health. Marketing department in the health organizations got greater responsibilities thanks to a new emphasis on health income from sources different from the traditional—the individual patients. (6)

Since in the health care is prevailing marketing, as wrote S. Cutlip et al., from health institutions are expected to more and better respond to the desires and needs of their market. (4) The traditional role of public relations, promotion of a positive image and the appropriate transfer of news, spread on the implementation of conclusions about how to deal with new levels of consumer criticism and training of internal public on teamwork. Decade from 1970 to 1980 meant in the U.S. the time of financial difficulties for traditional public relations staff. Doctors slowly start to lose control of the health system in relation to the mistakes. Constant pressure forced hospital managers to seek professional public relations and communication professionals to maintain two-way communication between hospitals or health organizations and their public. (6) Reasons for this practice were numerous and can be found in an everyday medical practice. How should such a communication “philosophy” be adopted in our region, here’s one local example:

Miroslav Maskarin from island of Rab, 20 year old, who is due to medical errors during a routine appendectomy nearly died, was stable but in difficult state and still vitally threatened. Another young man's leg is still in danger. Although at the end of August, Croatian Medical Association found that when treating 20 year old Miroslav there has been no professional medical errors, nearly three months later—in late November, the Municipal State Attorney's Office in Rijeka has filed to a Investigative Judge of the Rijeka County Court, a proposal to conduct investigative actions against two doctors who treat unfortunate young man. Lawyers of Miroslav Maskarin at the end of last month in the Rijeka Clinical Hospital, where the young man was treated and has lost his leg, with extra-judicial settlement tried to reduce litigation in court and are looking for a hospital compensation of 13,705,000 HRK. (7)

First jobs in the PR of health care were focused on strategy and tactics that supported the health organization. PR is considered something that is better to use than a long-term and uncertain process of building a loyal and satisfied patient. Such an approach promotes the asymmetric one-way view of the role of health care PR; consider Traynowicz-Hetherington et al. (6)

Present and future of health is focused on the central role of the patient looking for new ways of communicating. Research suggests dynamism of work in public relations. Two-way symmetrical models are presented and described by J. Grunig and T. Hunt is not completely proven in real practical situations. Traditional approaches to health care PR did not disappear, but were transformed through the continued changes which occur within the health system. PR practitioners in the health care continued to write research and plan. Communication principles that they describe and predict in health are long-term relationship which is no less important in the PR of health than in any other human relationships. Principles of reciprocity, equality, respect and belief take new meaning in the context of health care business relationships. With the patient in the middle, vendors and suppliers such as doctors, pharmaceutical companies, managing companies and third-person which "paying compensation" are in a unique puzzle of public relations. Experts believe that one of the most important roles of PR is listening to patients, rather than transmitting the message. Proactive methods of promoting medical images, such as educational initiatives, are equal with the emphasis on prevention of health problems. (8)

## 6. CONCLUSION

- If we accept the logic of the above "definition" of public relations in health care, on us are imposed few conclusions as opportunities how public relations can help health care institutions.
- To successfully communicate with the public, all health facilities should define/isolate their internal and external public.
- Within health care institutions should be determined/defined the person(s) for the (internal and

external) communications.

Not to forget:

- The first person of the organization is PR officer, spokesman, and communicator.
- Recruitment and training of new communication experts is not a cost but an investment which will in a longer period repay several times.
- To educate staff regarding communication with the public on public relations and media relations. Then educate also the public to accept (new) image of health institutions.
- Define the key, target, communication channels, techniques and methods of communication.
- Establish approaches and models of communication, and relentlessly communicate, communicate, communicate with their public.

This means:

- Health institutions must move from reactive to proactive communication with their public. Proactive communication must be bidirectional (symmetric) in order to satisfy the interests of all the patients and the public.

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