Message Lab – a platform for research and improvement of public health messages

Steven Woloshin[1,2,3], Andrew D. Oxman[3], Christopher J. Rose[3], Sarah E. Rosenbaum[3], Christine Holst,
Lorena Diaz-Hemard[4], Gabriel Rada[4], Camilo Vergara[4], Heather Munthe-Kaas[3].

[1]Center for Medicine in the Media, Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy and Clinical Practice,
Lebanon, New Hampshire, United States; [2]The Lisa Schwartz Foundation for Truth in Medicine,
Norwich, Vermont, United States; [3]Centre for Epidemic Interventions Research, Norwegian Institute
of Public Health, Oslo, Norway; [4]Epistemonikos Foundation, Santiago, Chile

Relevance and importance to patients

The aim of the Message Lab is to help improve how evidence-based public health messages are
communicated, so that the messages and underlying research are informative and correctly
understood by patients and the public.

Background

Well-designed public health messages can make people aware of what they can do (or not do) for
their health and help them to make informed choices. On the other hand, poorly designed messages
can confuse people, lead to poorly-informed decisions, and diminish trust in health authorities and
research.

Objectives

To set up a platform to facilitate the design and evaluation of public health messages.

Methods

Our starting point is evidence-based guidance for effective health communication, including the use
of simple and familiar wording, clear visual design, and careful testing in target audiences. We will
prioritise questions together with an international advisory group, focusing on important
uncertainties about how best to communicate information about the effects of health interventions.
These include, for example, how to communicate uncertainty about effects, the use of positive
versus negative framing for different types of decisions, and the use of visual displays of intervention
effects.

We identified recruitment platforms that can be used for online randomized trials and platforms for
user testing. We assessed these based on several criteria. We then tested selected platforms in a
randomized trial comparing three ways of communicating the overall uncertainty of effects and
comparing including the margin of error (confidence interval) to not including it.

Results

In this presentation we will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different user testing and
recruitment platforms for online randomized trials, and we will present the findings of our trial of
different ways of communicating the uncertainty of effects.

Conclusions

The Message Lab offers an efficient way for researchers to test different methods of communicating public health messages and for health authorities to design public health messages that are effectively communicated.