Use of Fotonovelas as a Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Tool in a Diabetes Disease Management Program

The Problem We Face

Persistent racial/ethnic disparities exist in health care, even after controlling for socioeconomic confounders, such as income, education and access to health insurance. African Americans and Hispanics experience higher prevalence of diabetes, worse quality of care, and a higher illness burden than whites. Among the modifiable factors hypothesized to contribute to the disparities are environmental factors and specific health behaviors.

Culturally relevant approaches have been linked to increased knowledge and understanding for self-care in diabetes.

Traditional health industry and health plan practices for addressing health education needs of patients, members of ethnically diverse backgrounds or those with limited English proficiency include offering access to a language translation line and printed materials in alternate languages. These materials are often pure translations of the source educational content in English.

Health-related fotonovelas take full advantage of the popular culture approach to message development and content presentation for Latino audiences. A specific aim of the health-related fotonovela is to address the problem of literacy, which has gained the attention of professionals throughout the health field, especially in regard to the culturally diverse population. Prior research has shown that information in the language of the target population. One must also adapt educational materials for different levels of overall literacy, but more specifically for health literacy itself.

Focus Group Results

Participants in the Hispanic groups said that the fotonovela was particularly appropriate way to approach the Hispanic community.

The effectiveness of the fotonovela was validated through a focus group evaluation of the pilot materials. The fotonovela proved to be a significant educational tool. Among both male and female Latino focus groups, participants were very enthusiastic about the fotonovela: “This is about life and how to avoid having your diabetes get worse.” They said it really brings up family memories. They would read it and keep it. “This is something you should keep in mind because it is very important.”

Almost all of participants said that the fotonovela was the single most important piece of material they were shown: “It’s about real life.” Participants also appreciated the thoughtful way sensitive topics are addressed, like fatigue and sexual dysfunctions, “and a lot of people don’t want to talk about sexual dysfunction, but that’s real.”

Indeed, the entertainment nature of the fotonovela was particularly inviting and encouraged the Hispanic readers to finish the educational materials. One of the younger participants who normally reads English said that she wanted the photo novels in Spanish because she watches Spanish television. Other comments included:

- This is an easy way to read it (information about diabetes). Not so serious...
- The photos made it more interesting.
- This is a great medium to attract the Hispanic population, because any store we go into, there’s lots of little novellas.
- If you’re really looking specifically for the Latino community, it’s this, the comic book, that will attract them.

Evaluation Methodology

The study involved two phases of focus groups held 2008 – 2009 by an independent market research firm. The focus groups were facilitated by a Hispanic moderator and conducted in Spanish. Sessions with Hispanic participants (n=37) were held in Los Angeles, California. The first set of focus groups tested prototypes of culturally optimized health education materials with members with diabetes, and the second set of focus groups evaluated responses to final pilot materials for efficacy and potential abrasions.

All subjects were commercially insured adults living with diabetes between the ages of 20 and 82. Each set had 8 to 15 participants that had been diagnosed with diabetes between less than 1 year and as many as 16 years prior.