

Lost in Translation: The Health Crisis

Whether locked in a lab with no windows or hidden at a library desk, the life of a thesis - writing graduate student has its moments of academic exhaustion. Discouraged by the questions, “When will I finish?” or “Will anyone ever read this?” graduate students around the globe find themselves searching for their academic muse.

As a Master’s student in Simon Fraser University’s *new* Health Education and Physical Activity Program (HEPA), I had the recent privilege of taking part in the International School Health Literacy Symposium held in Vancouver, March 13-14, 2008. The conference, both inspiring and empowering, delivered the world’s best to Vancouver. Renowned health literacy experts (such as Doctors Don Nutbeam, the father of the discipline of health literacy, and Irving Rootman who was instrumental in publicizing health literacy in Canada) met with international and Canadian policy makers to discuss health literacy in the school setting and explore collaborative international research. The latter participants would do well to heed the urgency of the conference’s message – we must raise health literacy levels in today’s youth.

According to a report from the Canadian Council on Learning, 60% of Canadians lack the capacity to obtain, to understand, and to act upon health information and services, in order to make appropriate health decisions on their own. We are constantly inundated with mixed media messages encouraging consumption while targeting our insecurities. Many adults struggle to make healthy choices:

Replace sugar with aspartame? Doesn’t aspartame cause cancer?

Eat less fat, but it’s so convenient. Diet products are bad for you too.

Smoking kills. Smoking can make you skinnier.

Lost in translating health information, today’s children will be the first generation of Canadians to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

Attending the recent health literacy symposium, I felt like an English professor sharing a few days with Paulo Coelho and Margaret Atwood. The health literacy crew brought their academic works to life and made clear the strides that must be taken for improved understanding of health literacy globally. Our policy-makers often have goals with near-term objectives (locally, think 2010); sustainable improvements in health literacy demand a longer-term vision and early health literacy education.

We must stop working to solve health issues in isolation. Consider obesity. This is not solved by simply taking vending machines out of schools. Eliminating obesity will require that individuals develop self-confidence and make better informed lifestyle decisions. Other health challenges abound – drug and alcohol abuse, emotional abuse, poor nutrition. We must empower individuals to make sound decisions confidently. We are all lost in the crowd sometimes, and it is only by developing individuals’ skills and competencies that we can help prepare each other to make *health literate* choices.

We have the knowledge in our own province. Internationally recognized as global leaders, the B.C. Health Literacy team, comprised of experts such as Dr. Jim Frankish

from UBC and Dr. Sandra Vamos of SFU, has gained global momentum through this symposium.

Vancouver was an admirable host to health literacy's finest advocates; let their visit spur us to global leadership in our own backyard. We can effect change, but must start with developing strong foundations.

Even hopeful graduate students need a reminder about empowerment once in a while.

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