

CAREFULLY THINKING IT THROUGH: DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A LOCAL COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Project Description

Clinical research and its importance are difficult concepts to convey to the general public. Any kind of communications activity therefore needs to be thoroughly planned and each type of audience carefully considered.

A communications plan presents a really exciting opportunity to conduct a stakeholder engagement and awareness raising campaign. A project in the North West looked to increase engagement with stakeholders, raise awareness of research and to further build up an extensive network of contacts for the region.

Any form of communication needs to have a strong strategy and team behind it. Strong team work and a willingness to take on extra work and learn new skills were also key to the success of the project. The end result is that there is now a broader group of people to reach out to about current and new research opportunities.



Dementia and research into its causes, treatment and prevention, was set as a national policy area after the issue of the Prime Minister's Challenge on Dementia in March 2012. An estimated 850,000 people are thought to have dementia, and this figure is set to reach over one million by 2021. This, coupled with an ever-ageing population, places a huge burden on the NHS and our social care system.

Identifying the audience

Any campaign that calls on people to take action requires careful planning and consideration, and the North West is no exception. Annabel Darby, Communications Officer in the region, explains, "due to its geography and large population, any kind of communications activity needs to be tailored so that it is relevant to the region and audience it's targeting. NHS staff and members of voluntary organisations, as well as members of the public, were key stakeholders in this campaign. They needed to be engaged as they are very important when it comes to 'sign-posting' patients to research".

The campaign took place within the Cheshire and Merseyside Comprehensive Local Research Network (C&M CLRN) footprint. This is where the Network's Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) Coordinator, Clare Jones, is based and consequently where the Network's bulk of contacts lie. As there were no suitable studies to refer patients to at the time of the campaign, the main success measure was set as increasing the number of contacts held by the Network and also in making contact with as many GP surgeries, Trusts and voluntary organisations as possible, thereby upping the Network's stakeholder engagement.

Healthcare professionals can get a Join Dementia Research account to find out what studies are recruiting locally. Please visit the Resources section at nhs.joindementiaresearch.nihr.ac.uk for more information.

More reasons for public engagement

Attendance at events was an important part of the campaign as it helped to fully explain the project. Clare Jones attended over 20 events in six months with a stand containing literature about research

opportunities and the work of the Network. She was able to speak directly to members of the voluntary sector and also the general public about the importance of research. As she emphasises, this is a very important part in communications:

“Attending these events meant I was able to speak directly to people and explain the campaign. As part of my role as PPI Coordinator, I am in regular contact with voluntary groups. We find people often don’t fully understand research and we wanted to get across that research is about a lot of different things. It is not just drug-related. It can be just about getting information together to change policy. This campaign gave me an additional reason to engage with them about research.

“Further to my role, I also regularly forward out our quarterly newsletters to all PPI contacts, the Enabling Research in Care Homes (ENRICH) project contacts and take copies out to all meetings, carers groups and voluntary organisation meetings I attend. Thanks to the campaign, I now have more contacts to engage with”.

Raising awareness

To help encourage people to find out more about research, an A5 awareness-raising postcard was created. These were circulated to contacts held in

the C&M CLRN region and also gave the team a new opportunity to make contact with new groups and organisations.

Rowan Callaghan, Clinical Studies Officer for the North West explains: “We wanted to increase people’s awareness of research across Merseyside and Cheshire as well as increasing the number of contacts we hold on our central database. Our aim was to go out to the voluntary sector, GPs and Trusts and tell them more about what we do and encourage them to signpost members of the public to research”.

Widening the audience

Clare Jones goes on to say, “Since our inception, we have built up a very comprehensive contacts database. The communications project allowed us to grow this by a considerable number so there is now an even wider audience to reach out to. There are a lot of positive things that have come out of it, such as a wider network of people we can engage with in the future”.

A full-time communications officer, Annabel, was put in post with the hope to continue to raise awareness of research into dementias and neurodegenerative diseases amongst Trusts, NHS staff, the CLRN, the general public and voluntary organisations through proactive media relations, newsletters, social media, online activity and internal news bulletins.

Top Tips

- Identify your audience
- Conduct a thorough stakeholder analysis before any kind of campaign and work out how you will communicate with them
- Make sure communications activity is aligned with that from the national team
- Have a clear communications strategy and an idea of how you will evaluate a campaign before you start
- Order free Join Dementia Research materials to promote the service. Visit: news.joindementiaresearch.nihr.ac.uk/join-dementia-research-materials/ for more information

For more information visit:

nhs.joindementiaresearch.nihr.ac.uk

