Local Medical Associations in Japan

Public Relations Activities of the Okinawa Medical Association

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The Okinawa Medical Association (OkMA) works actively with the slogan “dynamic medical association rooted in the community,” which is put up by President Dr. Nobuo Miyagi. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the formation of a committee dedicated to public relations for proactive communication with Okinawa residents, an attempt to conduct a dialog directly with them. Launched six years ago, the committee spoke of “accepting the humiliation of standing before the people without fear.” Here, I will discuss some of the activities thus actually conducted.

Gatherings with the Mass Media

Given our experience of permitting the formation of public opinion critical of the healthcare community to guide public opinion on downward revisions of medical service fees and other cutbacks in public spending on social security, we considered the first requirement of public relations was to conduct an active dialog with the mass media. A major factor in critical reportage of healthcare being an inadequate understanding of healthcare, the medical association sought to fulfill accountability and proactively develop opportunities for leading the mass media to gain a deeper appreciation of what healthcare involves.

Since 2002 we have worked to dedicate adequate time to providing background and context that go beyond superficial understanding and conducting unreserved exchanges of views on such matters as nosocomial infections, medical litigation, physician shortages, and the incidents involving the prefectural Oono Hospital. While gatherings with the mass media initially tended towards the confrontational, our common purpose of serving the welfare of the people of Okinawa has led us towards the development of an ideal relationship of mutual respect between the healthcare community and the mass media in areas where they are able to work together. Held four or five times a year, these gatherings are followed by informal dinners, and we are confident that mutual understanding is possible if we are able to conduct a face-to-face dialog.

New strains of influenza and suicide are two of many issues in which the mode of reportage has a major impact on the public, and we expect that our gatherings with the mass media will play a growing role in future. Our repeated efforts over six years have now borne fruit in the form of a beneficial relationship, and I would like by all means to emphasize here that our achievement did not come about overnight.

Lectures Open to the Public

While the firmly established public image of Okinawa is of longevity and good health, the obesity and lifestyle-related diseases that accompany

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the westernization of eating habits are causes in
the fall to the 26th rank in average male life expect-
ancy in 2003, what is known as the 26 Shock. The
restoration of longevity and good health is vital
for Okinawa, which has branded itself as the
byword. There being no possible resolution of
these circumstances without an individual sense
of crisis among the people of Okinawa, the public
relations committee has debated how to develop
a space for appealing to them directly.

Holding lectures open to the public sponsored
jointly with a local newspaper is a solution that
meets contemporary needs, and we have periodi-
cally held the lectures two or three times annu-
ally. The lectures have enjoyed audiences of 500
to 1,000, and with a thematic variety they have
now firmly established themselves. Addressing
such themes as lifestyle-related diseases, suicide,
smoking, cancer screening, and cognitive disorders,
the lectures have been a consistent success. In
the latter half of these events, panelists respond
directly to questions from the floor, which pro-
vides effectively the sense of community in the
hall. At times the audience breaks out in laughter,
and the lectures serve not only for the accurate
communication of medical information, but also
to create greater familiarity with the activities of
the OkMA and to forge a favorable impression
of the medical association.

Although the effort to communicate the good
faith of the OkMA directly is a painstaking one
that costs money, we firmly believe it to be essen-
tial to creating an environment that facilitates
relationships of trust with patients in the routine
medical care practiced by physicians on the front
lines of community healthcare.

Other Activities

We have introduced healthcare essayists to local
newspapers. Such persons also appear on local
television and radio programs to present consist-
tently the cases for health and medical welfare.
Remaining aware that such media exposure entails
the danger of occasional commercialist utilization,
we take pains to handle the name of the
OkMA to serve for the public welfare.

Closing Remarks

Although our public relations work might at first
seem to be showy activities, in fact it is mostly
low-key and often requires negotiations. With
broad support, public relations activities have
an established place in the medical association.
We brook no coziness in relationships with mass
media and such contact requires maintenance of
constant vigilance. Public decency requires that
we sometimes lodge firm objections to unaccept-
able coverage. Even when objecting, however,
our approach is to maintain a consistent attitude
to deepen mutual understanding. There is no
advantage to anyone in confrontation between
the mass media and the medical association. And
above all, we expect that many members will gain
a deeper appreciation of our public relations
activities. I hear that medical associations every-
where face budgetary challenges when it comes
to public relations activities.

Asked to justify public relations from a cost-
benefit perspective, it is difficult to present any
evidence. Our view is that the significance of pub-
lic relations deserves proper recognition, that it
puts down extensive roots in an environment
amenable to its appreciation and that it will event-
ually bear fruit.