

Public Relations Activities of the Okinawa Medical Association

JMAJ 53(1): 57–58, 2010

Osamu TAMAI*¹

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 cut-backs 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

*¹ Board Member, Okinawa Medical Association, Shimajiri-gun, Japan (jimuso@okinawa.med.or.jp).

This article is a revised English version of a paper originally published in the Journal of the Japan Medical Association (Vol.137, No.9, 2008, pages 1902–1903).

the westernization of eating habits are causes in the fall to the 26th rank in average male life expectancy 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 periodically held the lectures two or three times annually. 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 provides 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 essential 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.

Gatherings with the Public to Discuss Healthcare

Whereas lectures open to the public deal primarily with illnesses in gatherings with over 500 people of Okinawa in large halls, since 2004 we have also held gatherings with the public to discuss healthcare with the objectives of hearing directly people's views on the social security system and holding a dialog about it. We ask such public organizations as the social insurance office, senior citizens' clubs, and small and medium business associations to send one representative each, with another 20 participants representing the residents at the gatherings held twice or three

times annually.

The gatherings feature unreserved exchanges of views on such matters as emergency care, long-term care insurance, and the problem of the reduction of long-term care beds. Some views are quite acrimonious, and it can be extraordinarily difficult to find some productive outcome in just a short period of time without either unnecessary confrontation or an apologetic stance of the OkMA. We plan to expand the gatherings and to develop them into a venue for direct dialog with the public.

Other Activities

We have introduced healthcare essayists to local newspapers. Such persons also appear on local television and radio programs to present consistently 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 unacceptable 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 everywhere 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 public relations deserves proper recognition, that it puts down extensive roots in an environment amenable to its appreciation and that it will eventually bear fruit.