

# Communication for Health in the WHO Western Pacific Region

## Overview

No matter who they are or where they live, people seek out and share information constantly. Every day, we see flyers, posters and advertisements, hear and participate in conversations with colleagues, neighbours, friends and family members, watch videos and news programmes, scroll through social media and search the Internet seeking instantaneous answers to all manner of questions. The information – and misinformation – we are exposed to shapes the decisions we make that impact our health and well-being, for better or worse.

Acting on the wrong information – for example, about vaccines – or failing to act from a lack of information – for example, about the most effective personal protective behaviours against COVID-19 – can have catastrophic consequences. In contrast, acting on the right information has the power to transform lives for the better – prompting people to get vaccinated or screened for cancer, visit their doctor for an antenatal or well baby checkup, quit smoking, exercise regularly or eat more healthily.

The rapid pace of information flow, the rise of social media influencers and the declining trust in governments and institutions present both challenges and opportunities for WHO and Member States in the Western Pacific Region in scaling up effective use of strategic communication to influence health outcomes. At the same time, the evidence base on the power of effective communication is expanding. Governments, civil society and the private sector are harnessing behavioural insights, data collection and evaluation to make smarter investments for more impactful communication. This changed landscape demands that we – WHO and ministries of health – also change how we communicate.

## Communicating for health impact

Communication for Health (C4H) is a priority for the implementation of *For the Future* – our shared vision for WHO's work with Member States and partners to make the Western Pacific the healthiest and safest region. The vision recognizes the power of strategic communication as a tool for contributing to better health outcomes and highlights the need for further investment in this area.

The C4H approach encourages communicators to focus on health outcomes and impact. Harnessing insights from social, behavioural and communication sciences, C4H works to increase knowledge, change attitudes and shift behaviours for improved health outcomes at the individual, community and societal levels.





The publication, *Communication for Health (C4H) in the WHO Western Pacific Region*, outlines the WHO C4H approach in the Western Pacific Region and the progress made since 2019 to strengthen and scale up the approach, with a view to establishing a full-fledged C4H technical programme supporting Member States by 2023. Examples of how WHO and Member States in the Western Pacific have applied C4H to various health challenges are provided. For instance, a television drama in Papua New Guinea helped to shift attitudes related to care seeking during pregnancy.

The Region's *People of the Western Pacific* series brings together health stories of real people across the Western Pacific and motivates others to make choices that positively impact health and well-being. Another example of C4H in action highlights a regional campaign to increase tobacco users' intentions to quit and encourage non-users to support their loved ones to quit through targeted advertisements on social media in local languages in countries with high smoking rates, which included post-campaign surveys to evaluate results and inform future campaigns.

While each of these projects took a different C4H approach, they shared a common goal: using communications strategies and interventions to make measurable contributions to improved public health outcomes.

## Building foundations for C4H in countries

When used effectively, communication is, in itself, a public health intervention: it is a technical field backed by theory and evidence, and it is just as valuable and important for tackling health challenges like COVID-19 as other fields of public health expertise, such as epidemiology, virology, health economics and health service design.

WHO is working with Member States in the Western Pacific to build their C4H capacity, developing communication methods and strategies that are informed by data and grounded in audience listening, to support Member States to address current and future challenges to health in the Region.

Scaling up C4H will bring us closer to achieving the Region's vision, as set out in *For the Future*. It requires cooperation between WHO, Member States and partners, and investments to build capabilities and strengthen the evidence base in the Region. Working together to adopt and scale up C4H, we can help make the Western Pacific Region the healthiest and safest region.

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