



THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Advocacy by Frontline Health Workers

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THE PROBLEM

Most people become inured to numbers and statistics. When they hear that, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), 400 million people around the world lack access to essential health services, or that the world will be short 18 million health workers by 2030, they might have a hard time comprehending what those figures really mean. What exactly does a shortage of 18 million health workers look like?

Statistics, particularly those that involve people, simply can't convey all the complexity and humanity that exist behind the numbers. Sheer numbers can numb. Data can support the bones of an argument, but human experience fleshes it out.

OUR INNOVATION

Storytelling is a way to give a face and narrative to numbers and statistics. Proper storytelling can foster empathy, establish trust, and more urgently convey the importance of taking action. Health workers who can provide first-hand context and succinctly convey a vivid portrait of the urgency and often tragic consequences of the lack of access to essential health services are more likely to resonate with decision-makers. In doing so, they can influence policies to enhance health services in their communities and raise the profiles of frontline health workers and the structural barriers they face.

In 2017, with support from the Medtronic Foundation, IntraHealth International invited a handful of inspiring frontline health workers who focus on fighting noncommunicable diseases to participate in a few months of intensive storytelling training. Since then, IntraHealth has trained 12 frontline health workers from Brazil, India, Ireland, Liberia, South Africa, Uganda, and the United States in the art of storytelling to better share their experiences of providing health care to underserved communities. Their stories have been shared at forums such as the World Health Assembly, US congressional briefings, the Fourth Global Forum on Human Resources for Health, the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the Global Conference on Primary Health Care, and IntraHealth's annual SwitchPoint conference.

IntraHealth and Medtronic partnered on the storytelling initiative with three principal aims: 1) to ensure global health policymakers and influencers hear more voices of frontline health workers, 2) that frontline health workers who received the training have the tools to continue advocating for policies and investments they feel are important, and 3) that more organizations and institutions prioritize the voices and stories of frontline health workers in high-level global health policy forums and meetings.

WHAT WORKED

The storytelling training equipped health workers to confidently and skillfully convey their stories and use them to try and improve policy whenever they get in front of policymakers and influencers. Through storytelling, some frontline health workers have influenced key policy changes. For example, Samalie Kitooleko, a nurse at the Uganda Heart Institute in Kampala, who spoke at the World Health Assembly in Geneva in 2017, spurred policies that allow all patients, regardless of their ability to pay, to receive care at the institute.

Shortly after Maria Valenzuela, a community health worker from Arizona, spoke in 2017 at a congressional briefing organized by the Frontline Health Workers Coalition on the impact of frontline health workers, bipartisan House Resolution 342 was introduced in the United States Congress. It recognizes that frontline health workers are essential "to strengthening the United States national security and economic prosperity, sustaining and expanding progress on global health, and saving the lives of millions of women, men, and children around the world."

At the 2017 World Health Assembly, said IntraHealth president and CEO Pape Gaye, "we saw the faces of policymakers at the highest levels—from ministers to the heads of multilateral agencies—transfixed by the stories of these frontline health workers... We are proud to help amplify their voices and will keep pushing to ensure they have a platform to tell their stories."

Sunil Kumar, who managed community health workers for IntraHealth in India's Jharkhand state, spoke in vivid detail about the dedication of frontline health workers to saving women's and children's lives at a World Health Assembly side session that included leaders such as the director-general of the WHO and executive director of



UNAIDS. This helped spur WHO's first-ever guidelines on community health worker programs.

Vince Blaser, director of the Frontline Health Workers Coalition, explained, "When we as advocates speak to policymakers about the acute necessity of far greater and more strategic investment in the global frontline health workforce, heads often nod but action doesn't always follow. But when policymakers are presented with data combined with the human stories that bring home the realities of working on the front lines of care, the onus to act becomes much harder to ignore."

Since the inception of the program, trained storytellers have been regularly asked to participate in panels, leadership programs, or other opportunities. For example, Valenzuela was selected to speak on a plenary at the invitation-only Global

Conference on Primary Health Care in Astana, Kazakhstan, in October 2018, and subsequently was selected as an Aspen-Aetna Healthy Communities Fellow. Organizations such as Last Mile Health, Women in Global Health, Global Citizen, and the Global Health Council have sought lessons learned from this initiative or invited storytellers trained by the project to speak on panels.

WHAT WE LEARNED

This initiative provided countless reminders of just how powerful individuals—and their personal stories—can be. Storytelling, or the ability to spin a narrative, is an art that is not always intuitive. By teaching health workers how to structure and present their personal stories, helping them tap into their authentic experiences and drawing out their passions, they can gain the confidence and authority that helps them become agents for change.

Valenzuela's story of growing up poor in the foster care system and becoming inspired to dedicate her life to a community health career, which she shared in front of nearly 70 congressional staffers and government officials, moved many to tears and prompted them to take action. She was able to get her audience to imagine themselves as the young child bouncing helplessly from foster home to foster home, or as the young woman who received community nutrition classes and chose to become a social worker rather than succumb to the negative influences around her.

It's not only policymakers who need to hear stories—patients also need them to influence changes in lifestyle patterns or to be encouraged to pursue or persevere with medical treatments. Kitooleko related a story about a family who refused life-saving procedures to encourage another family to seek treatment for their daughter. Within the community of frontline health workers, sharing stories and experiences can help inspire and motivate colleagues, or rekindle a commitment to serving others. Part of cultivating the art of storytelling in health workers is training them to be attuned to others' stories and how to share those stories with the larger world.

NEXT STEPS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR REPLICATION AND SCALE-UP

Going forward, IntraHealth and the Medtronic Foundation intend to train additional health workers as storytellers, as well as create a community of practice for frontline health workers to share best practices, collaborate on advocacy initiatives, and help inspire further storytelling. Former trainees such as Vânia Soares de Oliveira e Almeida Pinto, a community physician in Brazil, have started regular storytelling sessions among local health workers. Ultimately, IntraHealth and Medtronic hope to have built the foundation of a sustainable movement for frontline health worker storytelling for advocacy.

This brief is part of a larger publication about IntraHealth's innovative approaches to global health—one output of a 2019 landscape analysis of innovation at IntraHealth commissioned by its chief technical officer, Dai Hozumi.

Read the full report at www.intrahealth.org/7-creative-approaches

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