

# Communication and health

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## COMMUNICATION AND HEALTH

Communication in the area of health is consistently a central concern for policy makers, economists, and academics. Switzerland, along with other countries in Europe and North America, has confronted crises ranging from public debates around avian flu, obesity, and human genetic research to concerns about appropriate communication in different health settings. The media plays a key role in each of these debates and the importance of the provider-patient interaction is an ever-growing concern in the provision of quality health care. Increasingly, the key question in relation to communication and health is how to maximize health outcomes through optimal communication. Thus, researchers who examine the impact of communication on health and health care delivery are privileged to focus upon processes of fundamental human import.

In order to address the growing need for experts in the field of communication and health, we created a doctoral school, Pro\*Doc Communication & Health ([www.comhealth.ch](http://www.comhealth.ch)), that is focused on communication and health research. Five Swiss research groups are involved in the program: University Lugano, Institute of Communication & Health of the Faculty of Communication Sciences and the Center for Organizational Research of the Faculty of Economics, University Neuchatel, Institut de Psychologie du Travail et des Organisations, University Zurich, Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research, and the unit of personnel and organizational psychology at the University of Fribourg. The doctoral school is also associated with the Center for Marketing and Consumer Health, Virginia Tech, USA. Together, these groups seek to integrate communication, psychological, social marketing and organizational research to better understand communication and health issues and to maximize

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health outcomes. 14 PhD students take part in the doctoral school which started with the first 6 seminars in 2008.

The Communication & Health doctoral school ensures that young researchers have the opportunity to focus on and advance this rapidly developing and multi-disciplinary field, contributing to an understanding of how health outcomes can be maximized through optimal communication in the context of both mediated and mass communication as well as direct interpersonal communication. Factors affecting communication effectiveness operating at both the macro (social, cultural and organizational) level as well as the micro (individual and dyadic) level will form critical foci.

The doctoral school includes a focus on the methodological and theoretical skills and abilities required to conduct research in the area of communication and health, encompassing the study and use of communication to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health. A key feature of the doctoral school is its ability to bridge different disciplines from the social sciences *and* humanities. The school's curriculum, combining academic study and research experience, provides to students a broad understanding of their subject area as well as their knowledge of the different (inter-) disciplinary methods for conducting research in the health area. The graduate school is unique, because it not only teaches the disciplines in parallel but integrates them into a consistent general health science theory that has its roots in empirical research. Moreover, having one partner academic institution from the US, the doctoral program offers a truly intercultural enterprise.

Under this broad health communication umbrella, the partners bring complementary research expertise and interests to the program: from the Institut de Psychologie du Travail et des Organisations at Neuchatel, Profs. Schmid Mast, Bangerter, and Tschan bring particular expertise in social psychological research and instruction, and methodological expertise in experimental research. From the University of Zurich, Prof. Bonfadelli brings particular strength in the area of the media studies, and methodological expertise in program evaluation. The faculty from Virginia Tech (Prof. Nakamoto, Brinberg) bring a perspective of social marketing, the analysis of risk and decision making, and expertise in the empirical study of social change and in marketing research methods. Finally, the University of Lugano, where the program will be centered, brings a tradition of

strength in humanistic perspectives (e.g., linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, argumentation theory and philosophy) which has grown to include more behavioural science expertise, along with a focus on the role of technology in health communications and particular methodological strength in qualitative research. In addition, the participation of the Center for Organizational Research (CORe) at the University of Lugano, associated with the Faculty of Economics and directed by Lugano Professors Lomi and Larsen, adds strength in the areas of health economics, organizational theory, and social network analysis.

### *Importance*

Communication and health issues have an obvious importance in the maximization of individual health outcomes. In Figure 1, we provide a portrayal of the key stakeholders and communication flows that impact health outcomes at both the individual and societal levels. Moreover, these health outcomes can be considered in the context of enhancing wellness as well as treating illness. all the while recognizing the individual and societal costs. Beyond individual health outcomes, the quality of communication processes has an impact not only on the quality of treatment, but also on the efficiency, effectiveness, and economy of the health care system. Through their research on health communication, students in the Communication & Health program seek new insights on effective strategies to improve the overall health care system in Switzerland. This will be useful to responding to the future policy needs of the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health.

### *Goals*

The strategic aims of the Pro\*Doc Communication & Health are:

- Consolidating and extending ongoing research in the health communication field.
- Promoting the cross-fertilization of the disciplines working in the health communication field (e.g., communication sciences, psychology, media studies, social marketing, organizational theory) in research and in the education and training of doctoral students.

- Offering doctoral students an excellent training opportunity by using a coaching and tutoring team of national and international experts in health communication, as well as by educating the doctoral students by giving them experience with health communication research.

### *Scientific Domain and Topics*

As stated, the overarching theme of our program is the role of communication in the maximization of health outcomes, in which we include the outcomes of both the medical treatment of illness and the enhancement of wellness (e.g. health promotion). Central to our view of health communication is the fact that the consumer/client/patient is much more than a passive recipient of information. To the contrary, the consumer is an active participant in the communication process, with both capabilities and limitations, conditioned by knowledge, values, goals, and experience, all of which impact on his or her comprehension, acceptance, and application of communicated information. (Of course, we view health care providers in this same light.) This view greatly enriches our analysis of communication processes and outcomes in that it focuses attention on the consumer's actions as a decision maker. In that role, we draw not only on the medical and social sciences but also the human sciences, which call on us to consider intrinsically subjective as well as objective concerns and which highlight ethical dilemmas and linguistic, semiotic, and even aesthetic issues that impact healthcare consumers (as well as providers).

In seeking to understand the role of communication, we focus on communications among key stakeholders in the domain of health: 1) the consumer/client/patient, 2) the health care provider (e.g., physician, pharmacist, nurse), and 3) intermediaries including government agencies, non-profit health groups, and commercial institutions including insurance and pharmaceutical companies (Figure 1). We consider both direct interpersonal communication and communications between these stakeholders that are mediated – by the mass media including print, television, and radio, and by the Internet, which is creating completely novel communication opportunities and strategies.

As a group, we believe that doctoral students need some exposure to all of the perspectives brought by the program partners – theory and

research methods from psychology, sociology, medical communication, media studies, marketing, and the human sciences as well as both basic and applied research that spans virtually all of the communication flows exhibited in Figure 1. Thus, while specializing within one of the partner programs, the student is exposed as well to the richness and diversity of work in the field of health communication.

To support this goal, the partner faculties bring not only disciplinary and instructional expertise but also a depth of research experience related to most of the communication flows shown in Figure 1. In the domain of provider-to-provider communication (A), Professor Tchan (Neuchatel) is examining the impact of high stress situations on physician team decision making. Professor Bangerter (Neuchatel) is studying the (potentially negative) impact of the standardization through written reports of patient information in the context of nursing shift changes.

Research on provider-to-patient communications (B) are exemplified by the work of Professor Schulz and Dr. Caiata-Zufferey (Lugano) on the impact of the Internet on doctor-patient communication, by that of Professor Schmid Mast (Neuchatel) on the role of nonverbal communication in the same context, and a study of pharmacist-patient relationship management (Schulz and Maniscalco, Lugano and Brinberg, Virginia Tech). Consumer-to-consumer communications (D) are examined in the form of online support groups in chronic pain and their value in improving patient quality of life (Schulz, Rubinelli, and Caiata-Zufferey, Lugano).

Finally, intermediary-to-consumer communication is the focus of a range of research studies by partner faculty including:

- Direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription pharmaceuticals (joint: Schulz and Rubinelli (Lugano) and Nakamoto (Virginia Tech)).
- Program evaluations of various health promotion campaigns by national and local government (Bonfadelli, Zurich).
- Applied communications studies and program evaluations of NGO's in nationally important areas including organ donation, antibiotic abuse, chronic pain, non-ionizing radiation, and health literacy, (Schulz, Lugano).
- Measurement and enhancement of health literacy, particularly in the area of nutrition, exercise, and weight (Schulz and Ehmig, Lugano).

- Risk perception and the misuse of prescription drugs (Nakamoto, Virginia Tech).
- Tailored family-targeted nutrition information and obesity (Brinberg, Virginia Tech).

Further related research opportunities are offered by CORE applying network analysis, organizational ecology theory, and macro-level modelling of organizational dynamics to health care communication issues. The importance of these research programs for the training of doctoral students cannot be overestimated. All are well-developed and will provide ample opportunity for doctoral students to participate in empirical research on health communications, particularly as it relates to consumer health outcomes.

An added benefit of the program structure is that it encourages multi-disciplinary and multi-university research. Certainly, faculty at multiple partner universities are examining common health communication topics. Doctor-patient communication is a focus of research at both Neuchatel and Lugano. Program evaluation studies of health promotion campaigns are being carried out at both Zurich and Lugano. Moreover, multi-disciplinary, multi-university studies are already underway – e.g., joint Virginia Tech-Lugano projects on advertising, on relational marketing by pharmacies, and on health literacy. Encouraging such multi-disciplinary and multi-center research allow students to take advantage of the expertise of faculty at all the partner institutions in their research as well as curricular activities.

In sum, previous research has established a link between a vast array of communication processes related to health and health outcomes, and scholars must have the theoretical and methodological foundations and tools to conduct research to answer how and why communication processes lead to health outcomes. The research and curricular programs of Pro\*Doc Communication & Health seek to address these critical needs.

Figure 1: Health Communication Stakeholders and Flows





