When Others Ask Whether Social Marketing Works, What Do You Tell Them? A Review of Systematic Reviews of Social Marketing Interventions

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ABSTRACT

Background. Medical professionals are faced with many daily decisions regarding patient care. The published literature is a source of knowledge to inform such decision making. As the number of primary studies continues to increase, the number of systematic reviews has increased. Cochranes Reviews have evolved to now include reviews of systematic reviews (Cochrane Overviews). Similarly, public health professionals may be responsible for multiple interventions at any given time and thus need to make programming decisions. Reviews of systematic reviews may represent a means to better decision making. With respect to social marketing, many decision makers in public health—e.g., funders, peer reviewers, and practitioners—may ask: "Does it work?" The objective of this overview is to summarize evidence from more than one systematic review of the same approach (social marketing) for different conditions, problems, and populations.

Methods. A review of systematic reviews of the effectiveness of social marketing interventions was conducted without restrictions on health domain or time period under study. The literature search included multiple databases, websites of review centers, and backward search. Five reviews met predetermined relevance and publication criteria and were included. Standardized, pre-tested tools ("Effective Public Health Practice Project") used by one reviewer to rate each review for relevance and quality assessment (Table 1).

Results. Two reviews were rated strong, 2 moderate, and 1 weak. Results rated less than strong did not report formal quality assessments of primary studies. A multitude of domains were covered, including nutrition, physical activity, substance misuse, teenage pregnancy, hand hygiene, and others. No reviews included a formal meta-analysis.

Conclusion. Systematic reviews document that social marketing can be effective in a number of diverse domains. Future reviews should address quality, how social marketing works; cost-effectiveness, and comparative effectiveness.

METHODS

- A review of systematic reviews of the effectiveness of social marketing interventions
- Literature search included 12 databases and backward search of retrieved publications: Literature search included Google® and Google Scholar®
- Five reviews met predetermined relevance and publication criteria and were included (Figure 1)
- Inclusion: ‘systematic reviews’ of ‘social marketing’ ‘interventions’
- Exclusion: syntheses of interventions or social marketing nested within other approaches; grey literature
- Standardized, pre-tested tools (‘Effective Public Health Practice Project’) used by one reviewer to rate each review for relevance and quality assessment (Table 1)

RESULTS

Table 1. Quality assessment of systematic reviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Topic: Author(s) (Year)</th>
<th>Search Strategy</th>
<th>Comp. Search</th>
<th>Relevance Criteria</th>
<th>Primary Studies Assessed</th>
<th>Quality Assess.</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
<th>Integrate Findings</th>
<th>Support Conc.</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gordon et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Gordon et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Y Y Y Y Y Y Y</td>
<td>Methodologically STRONG reviews, sorted on quality score ranking. Key: Y = Yes, N = No, U = Unknown/Undetermined</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wakhle et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Gordon et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Y Y Y Y Y Y Y</td>
<td>Methodologically MEDIUM reviews, sorted on quality score ranking. Key: Y = Yes, N = No, U = Unknown/Undetermined</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mah et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Gordon et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Y Y Y Y U U Y</td>
<td>Methodologically WEAK reviews, sorted on quality score ranking. Key: Y = Yes, N = No, U = Unknown/Undetermined</td>
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Table 2. Results of STRONGEST review (Gordon et al. (2006))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Author(s) (Year)</th>
<th>No. of Studies (N) Time Span (TS)</th>
<th>Definition of Social Marketing</th>
<th>Intervention Strategy</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gordon et al. (2006)</td>
<td>N = 31 TS = 1983 – 2004</td>
<td>Anderson’s Benchmark Criteria (6/6)</td>
<td>School-based (n=9) Community-based (n=5) Non-school based (n=5) Church (n=3) Family (n=2) Other (n=7)</td>
<td>Increase fruit and vegetable intake (n=18) Reduce fat intake (n=18) Decrease and improve dietary knowledge (n=11) Influence psychosocial variable’s (n=17) Influence physiology (n=13)</td>
<td>Positive effect (n=10) Positive effect (n=8) Positive effect (n=9) Positive effect (n=13) Positive effect (n=12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSIONS and IMPLICATIONS

- Systematic reviews spanning many years and health domains document that social marketing can be effective.
- Future reviews should address study quality; how social marketing works; its cost-effectiveness; and its comparative effectiveness.
- Furthermore, social marketing (as a field) needs a strategic plan (a) to determine what position it wants to occupy in the social change marketplace and (b) to chart a course for its future.

REFERENCES