

Enhanced Outreach Activities Involving Data from the National Center for Health Statistics

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This paper documents new outreach activities at the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), one of the major statistical agencies of the US Federal Government. NCHS is also one of the Centers of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

This presentation contains NO statistics; just information on how NCHS has traditionally approached outreach and new approaches that are now in use or are being phased in. If readers have questions, contact information is provided at the end of the paper. In addition if agencies are using other successful methods of outreach, please share that information with NCHS.

For background information, listed below are some of NCHS' current major surveys and data collection efforts:

- Vital Statistics (births, deaths, and fetal deaths);
- The National Health Interview Survey – an in-person household survey;
- The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey – an actual physical exam given in specially equipped trailers that travel around the country;
- SLAITS – The State and Local Area Integrated Telephone Survey;
- The National Survey of Family Growth;
- The National Hospital Discharge Survey;
- The National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey;
- The National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Care Survey; and
- The National Nursing Home Survey.

This is a partial list but it sets the stage for describing the various types of outreach that are undertaken.

Staff of each of these surveys strive to provide as much data to researchers and the public in as detailed a manner and as quickly as possible. Over the last decade, the detailed outputs from these surveys have moved from data tapes, to

disks to cds and now to on-line access. In fact, much of the detailed data can now be downloaded for free from the NCHS website. The website is: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/>.

The Center has a wide variety of outreach activities:

- Internet
- Print, electronic and audiovisual products
- Conferences, exhibits, briefings and training
- Media
- Data requests

Internet. Each NCHS survey has a significant presence on the website. There are descriptions of survey design; data collection and processing; selected statistics and data files and documentation. A significant number of web pages are also available now “en Español”.

Print, electronic and audiovisual products. Of course NCHS still produces many printed reports as well as data on cd. Center staff exhibit at several conferences like this one each year. An important conference we *sponsor* every other year is the NCHS Data Users Conference. At that conference more than 1000 users gather to learn the detailed information about the surveys – how to run the data, how to weight the data, and then tips on analyzing the results.

Media. NCHS works with the media to get the health statistics messages out to the citizens. In fact, an electronic NCHS Press Room has recently debuted on the website to help reporters find data on their own. Of course most of the Media contact is still old-fashioned in-person conversations.

Data Requests. And lastly, but it arguably should be first due to sheer numbers, is our most low-tech method of getting the data out. We respond to thousands of requests each year for data by telephone, letter, and e-mail.

The Center has an impressive amount of data to share with its users. And staff are constantly looking for more and better ways to have NCHS

data used to make a difference in the health field. In 2003 the Center began to develop and implement a new program, a systematic approach to generate more awareness of and support for NCHS programs and services. Rob Weinzimer who spearheaded that effort is now the special assistant for outreach. Details of that effort are described below.

1. Contacting a wide range of organizations;
2. Conducting briefings;
3. Producing electronic newsletters; and
4. Working with Schools of Public Health.

Identifying organizations. First staff set about identifying current key users of NCHS programs and services and capturing information about Center relationships with them. Both snail mail and electronic mail listings of these users were produced. This allows staff to systematically target these key users with timely communications about new data findings, program activities, and issues of mutual concern. These key organizations are also encouraged to act as intermediaries to help NCHS reach their constituencies. Finally staff are assessing the data needs of current users and promoting interest about NCHS among potential users.

A small group became the part-time “outreach staff.” They spoke to relevant survey staffs and compiled lists of people, government offices and organizations that either were using our data or should be using the data. They created a database of nearly 400 organizations and individuals – including the e-mail addresses of pertinent staff.

The staff then developed an electronic “library” of briefing materials, i.e. up-to-date information on selected topics from the surveys. Next they created a desktop publishing capability for ‘on-demand’ production of newsletters and fact sheets, using a standardized masthead and color printer.

Electronic newsletters and fact sheets. Now NCHS has an informal electronic newsletter sent out under the signature of the NCHS Director. Five issues have been produced in a little over a year. This electronic newsletter is provided to the people and organizations identified in the process described above.

The newsletter consists of a number of topics with hot links that allow the reader to click on to

any topic to get more information. Some of the topics shown in a recent newsletter included information on new senior-level staff at NCHS, introduced new members of the NCHS Board of Scientific Counselors; announced upcoming data releases, introduced the NCHS “Press Room” debuting on the web and mentioned NCHS exhibits at upcoming national meetings.

In addition to the newsletter, processes were developed to produce fact sheets on hot topics quickly, have them reviewed by the proper channels and distributed through the NCHS website and other venues.

Early topics included overviews of the Center and its surveys; examples of uses of NCHS data and cross-cutting fact sheets on selected health topics. Cross cutting data are those data which come from more than one survey. Selected topics include asthma, birth defects, Alzheimer’s Disease, developmental disabilities, and Parkinson’s Disease.

The following example uses asthma as a fact sheet topic. Producing the fact sheet is simplified as staff have a canned already-prepared NCHS introductory information statement that is dropped into the newsletter. Then the number of persons with asthma, the number of visits to the hospital or to the doctor’s office, socioeconomic factors of people with asthma, and finally, deaths due to asthma are all dropped in. These data might come from four or more different data collection activities.

Briefings. It is crucial for Congress to know about NCHS and the data that we collect and can provide them. On a formal basis NCHS produces *Health United States* each and presents it to Congress. But less formal contact is important also. For example, an outreach staff member noticed that the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) had produced a report that quoted NCHS data, but the data were not the latest available. While discussing newer data with CBO, staff were able to set up a meeting with them to update them on NCHS data. The first briefing has been held and it was very well attended by CBO staff.

NCHS staff have also briefed a number of organizations including the Congressional Research Service, AARP, Washington Business Group on Health, and the National Pharmaceutical Council. Staff conducted a

workshop at the annual meeting of the American College of Epidemiology on “Teaching the Teacher”, to promote the use of NCHS data in graduate school curricula.

Schools of Public Health. Lisa Grabert, an Association of Schools of Public Health intern worked at NCHS in the summer of 2004. The Emory School of Public Health graduate student began the summer during a time of great change at NCHS and all of CDC. On May 1, Dr. Julie Gerberding, CDC’s Director, announced CDC would be undergoing a re-organization entitled *Futures Initiative*. As part of this initiative, Gerberding emphasized that CDC will become a customer-centric organization. In the CDC flow charts the customer is shown at the top of the chart and is of prime importance.

This “new” customer-centric orientation is one that NCHS has long tried to follow. Grabert’s intern project followed this goal also. She developed a program working with schools of public health to ensure that they have the health statistics readily available to meet the needs of professors and students. What better way to show the usefulness of NCHS data than to have it cited throughout the appropriate courses. Grabert collected course syllabi from the top 10 ranked schools of public health in the United States.

Each of the schools requires masters of public health students to take courses in five core public health areas which include: health policy, behavioral sciences, biostatistics, epidemiology, and environmental health. She compiled a number of topics within each of these core areas. For example, within environmental health, there is the theory of urban sprawl and the idea that urban sprawl may play a role in obesity. She proposed that NCHS data could be repackaged to reflect the specific needs of the schools of public health. If the plan comes to fruition, then urban sprawl and/or obesity could be a highlighted section within an individual survey’s website. Grabert commented that these core courses are usually taught to large classes – sometimes 200 or more. Each mention of NCHS data would then have a large audience of people with a significant interest in public health as well as NCHS statistics.

In her project, Grabert also reviewed the NCHS surveys’ websites and ranked them by certain criteria to evaluate the websites’ strengths and

weaknesses as a resource tool. Her review to date indicated that most of the sites are somewhat well organized for professional statisticians but maybe not so well organized or focused for the consumer or educational user. Her work in that area is continuing.

CDC and Hollywood

This paper ends with a more unusual outreach activity and one that involves the entire Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC has been involved in a project to get the health word out to Hollywood. The Hollywood, Health and Society program at the University of Southern California Norman Lear Center has been working with CDC and NIH to develop and maintain an entertainment education program in the area of public health.

This outreach works in several different ways. In one scenario, the Hollywood, Health and Society staff meet with CDC staff to see “what’s new and hot” in the public health field. Then they take that information to the script writers of on-going on-the-air shows to see if some health related information can be placed in the show. At other times, the writers themselves may approach the Hollywood, Health and Society staff and ask for assistance in fleshing out a story that contains health issues. CDC staff often talk with the writers; in some cases they actually meet face to face to go over the issues and the scripts. Here are a few examples.

NCHS was approached about a movie where a character was supposed to die of natural causes. The Center provided information on the most common causes of death for a middle age man.

At the end of the season, ER had some episodes that involved a man with severe diabetes. CDC worked with them to get a message across about healthy eating, the need to see a doctor, the fact that people may not know they have diabetes, etc.

NCHS has provided data to some daytime shows including soaps on birth and death and family growth issues. One interesting aspect there is that the health issues are often worked into the “life” of a secondary role, not necessarily the lead actor. But the viewer can see what is happening to a person that they may identify with.

In summary, NCHS is investigating many new options for getting the word out on the ever-increasing amounts of data that are available. Contact lead author Rob Weinzimer at RWeinzimer@cdc.gov for additional information or to provide suggestions for additional outreach activities.