

POSTER ABSTRACT

Strategic Communications Management During Major Healthcare Reform: Examining the Role of Public Relations in Ontario Health Teams and How East Toronto Health Partners is Transforming Communications in an Integrated Care Model

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Introduction

In February 2019, Ontario embarked on one of the largest health care reforms in its history, including the introduction of Ontario Health Teams (OHTs). As hundreds of multi-sector partners join forces to tackle major health system reform, particularly during a global health crisis, it is pivotal that OHTs develop a parallel process for strategic communications management to build the stakeholder relationships necessary to effect real change in the health system. Communications professionals have a defining role to play in directing strategic plans that enable purposeful patient partnership, timely response to community needs, and decision making through dialogic communications.

Aims Objectives Theory or Methods

This presentation will showcase research from a Master of Communications Management capstone project examining the role of strategic communications management in OHTs. Interviews were conducted in Fall 2020 with 14 Ontario hospital CEOs representing different OHTs that were operational for 10-12 months. These interviews helped the researcher understand current OHT communications structure, engagement methods with key stakeholders and how COVID-19 impacted these efforts. Based on interviews, an extensive literature review and document analysis, the researcher developed a best practice PR and communications model for OHTs – one that is currently being employed by East Toronto Health Partners (ETHP) OHT.

Highlights or Results or Key Findings

While respondents identified the critical need for strategic communications and engagement, the organization of the PR function varied significantly across 14 OHTs; only 43% had a communications committee in place, while nearly 30% said communications was “ad-hoc”. Only 50% of OHTs formally acknowledged the PR function in their organizational structures. Respondents cited online engagement as a key communications method, however only 9 out of 14

OHTs had a dedicated website and just over 60% were on at least one social media platform. ETHP's Communications Committee offers real-world examples of how strategic communications management practices markedly contribute to an integrated OHT model, including (1) the development of an OHT brand through extensive engagement, and (2) the successful implementation of East Toronto's COVID-19 immunization plan. These examples incorporate multiple conference themes including transferable lessons in the spread and scale of integrated care and conference tracks including system wide governance and leadership.

Conclusions

Healthcare communicators have a critical role to play in OHTs and guiding health system leaders on how to embed strategic communications practices and principles into the fabric of their newly formed health teams. It is recommended all OHTs formalize a communications committee made up of senior communicators from lead organizations.

Implications for applicability/transferability sustainability and limitations

Investment in strategic communications management will help OHTs meaningfully engage and build trust with the communities they serve. This will enable OHTs to gain a deeper understanding of community priorities and beliefs that will ultimately support the goal of creating healthcare solutions that meet the needs of their citizens.