

The Advocacy Initiative

Case study 2: Irish Heart Foundation (IHF)

The F.A.S.T. Campaign to Raise Public Awareness of Strokes Warning Signs

Background

The Irish Heart Foundation Stroke Action campaign began in 2009 with funding from Atlantic Philanthropies after Ireland's first national stroke audit revealed that organised services were virtually non-existent and that service improvements could reduce the death toll from the disease by at least 25%.

Increased public awareness of stroke symptoms was identified as a key campaign objective in the IHF's Stroke Manifesto, which set out its agenda to improve acute services, rehabilitation services and stroke prevention initiatives. This was due to the audit finding that just 5% of stroke patients were admitted to hospital within the time window to receive potentially lifesaving clot-busting treatment called thrombolysis.

The awareness campaign, titled 'Act F.A.S.T.' is aimed at helping the public achieve a better understanding of stroke warning signs. Stroke is the third biggest killer in Ireland, the biggest cause of acquired disability and over 10,000 people have a stroke in Ireland each year.

The F.A.S.T. acronym was created to help people remember the main warning signs of stroke so they can act immediately in the case of a stroke by dialling 999. A third of those affected by stroke are aged under 65 and the number of strokes among younger people is increasing due to lifestyle issues.

Approach

The F.A.S.T. campaign was based around an amended version of a TV advertisement developed by the UK Government and backed up by radio ads produced here. The media plan focused on over 40's and took account of the fact that stroke rates are significantly higher among lower socio-economic groups.

Due to the restricted funding available, it was always a priority not to rely only on advertising and to build a campaign that would be sustainable after the media budget was spent. Consequently, a campaign group was established comprising of stroke survivors, professionals and relevant organisations such as those representing

stroke care providers and older people. The group assisted in developing a plan to establish local F.A.S.T. campaign committees countrywide which was supported by a variety of campaign materials and advice contained in a booklet detailing every aspect of running a local campaign - from suggested activities to tips on dealing with media.

In the month of the campaign launch, 60 local campaigns were run in towns and cities nationwide, along with 271 sub-campaigns by emergency services, Councils, hospitals and large companies. Hundreds of chemists' stores also promoted the campaign, including all Boots stores nationwide. In total some 250,000 posters were displayed nationally, including GP surgeries, Garda stations, public libraries and Citizens Information Centres and 500,000 wallet cards distributed.

The initial plan was to run the advertising element of the campaign for four years from the May 2010 launch, with a total spend of €1 million. Due to the economic climate, the advertising was halted after 18 months. Some €500,000 was spent (including over one fifth in non-recoverable VAT) which makes it the costliest campaign ever run by the IHF.



Front cover of Strokeline

CASE STUDIES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY

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Despite this a robust network of committees was built around the country which continues to organise local campaigns each year during F.A.S.T. week and National Stroke Week. The number of local campaigns has grown from 60 in the first year, to 100 in 2011 and 130 this year. Among many recent developments to sustain the campaign, F.A.S.T. training is now being delivered in Irish jails by prisoners themselves.

Prior to the media campaign a baseline evaluation of stroke awareness was carried out by the Red C Research and Marketing Ltd., and analysed by the Royal College of Surgeons. A second survey was then carried out to establish the campaign impact. Both surveys involved a random sample of adults aged 18 and over. The surveys showed that those who could identify two or more stroke warning signs had increased from 30.7% to 68.7% a year into the campaign. Knowledge of what a stroke is increased from 38.8% to 81.2%.

Success Achieved

This heightened awareness of stroke warning signs has helped trigger an upsurge in the numbers of patients receiving clot-busting thrombolysis treatment. With the wider IHF stroke campaign also ensured the rapid expansion in the availability of clot-busting treatment; the national thrombolysis rate has risen from 2% to 10%, one of the highest worldwide. This resulted in over 150 people a year being saved from death or permanent severe disability from stroke. It is also saving the State around €4 million a year through a reduced need for nursing home places alone. F.A.S.T. also mobilised professionals and stroke survivors to support the wider IHF campaign for better stroke services which has a campaigners' network of some 10,000 people.

Although the 124% increase in public awareness of stroke warning signs in the first year of the campaign is way ahead of the overall campaign objective of 50% over four years, it is likely that these levels have dropped back somewhat since the TV ads ceased prematurely in 2011.



Covidien staff members supporting the launch of the F.A.S.T. campaign



Ms. Ciara Breen of the Irish Association of Occupational Therapists in Ireland

Learning

The key lessons from this campaign are:

- * It pays to be ambitious when planning campaigns.
- * The need to keep the message 'ruthlessly simple'.
- * The importance of TV advertising in changing public behaviour and in appealing to human interest.
- * The public are open to supporting health campaigns and their ability to understand health issues should not be underestimated.

The Future

The IHF aim is to ensure that the message becomes fully ingrained in the public consciousness. The IHF will continue the campaign on an ongoing basis and is hopeful of securing funding to resume TV advertising. Greater state involvement is also being sought, through initiatives such as putting F.A.S.T. training on the school curriculum and the use of promotional materials in high footfall areas such as state-owned buildings and properties. In this context the IHF has now got agreement for F.A.S.T. messages to be put on ambulances.

'Great campaign. Congratulations to the Irish Heart Foundation for making the complex simple, for making the threatening manageable. For making a quiet killer visible.'
Minister for Health, James Reilly, TD.



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