

Viral visuals: Developing pictograms to promote public health in the COVID pandemic

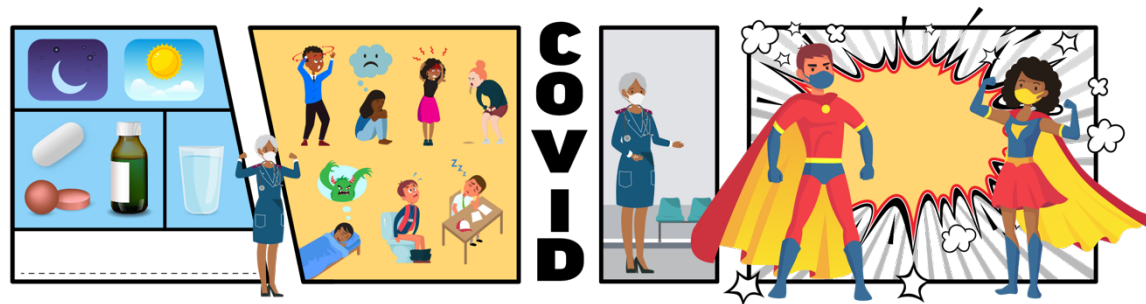


Figure 1: Iteration of a COVID pictogram to promote medicines-taking and public health within contexts of high communicable and non-communicable disease endemicity

Background

Evidence-based health communications are a core component of effective public health responses. In the Southern African region, and globally, health communications can play a powerful role in clarifying and strengthening accurate understandings about COVID. Pictograms – images of real-world objects and circumstances – have been developed to improve understanding of health information, including adherence to antiretroviral treatment among HIV-positive youth. These may be adapted to promote accurate understandings and empowering responses to the COVID pandemic.

Description

We conducted a rapid review of health communications available in public facilities within four of South Africa's nine provinces. Working in case- and contact-tracing teams, we identified the need for information about COVID-transmission, prevention and management. Between March and May 2020, an interdisciplinary group of clinicians, pharmacists, social scientists and graphic artists developed pictograms to support medicines-taking and promote public health, for both chronic and communicable diseases, in the context of the COVID-pandemic. Drawing on prior participatory research in which pictograms to promote ART adherence among HIV-positive youth were developed and piloted, we adapted these tools to promote public understanding about COVID among populations with different literacies and healthcare needs.

Lessons learned

Most current health communications about the COVID pandemic are 'text-heavy', relying on language-specific literacy. New information must recognise extant realities, including high burdens of communicable and chronic diseases. Public health responses to COVID must be framed within the context of broader socio-economic and epidemiological challenges, together with current medicines-taking and healthcare practices. Drawing on fundamentals of public health communications, including accessibility, relatability, translatability and relevance, these new communication intervention aim to promote awareness of COVID.

Conclusion

There is a critical lack of accurate, accessible and empowering information on COVID for healthcare workers and vulnerable patient populations already taking medicines. Tools developed to support medicines-taking for communicable and non-communicable diseases may be adapted for COVID, but must be carefully piloted to ensure public viability and resonance.

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