Improving Environmental Health Literacy: the Cross-disciplinary Approach within the Italian Asbestos Project

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Background

Information literacy requires a cross-disciplinary approach at both transnational and local level (WHO, 2012a; Sørensen et al., 2012) and this is particularly evident in the field of global environmental health. The Asbestos case exemplifies a critical environmental health issue requiring a cross-disciplinary approach (ILO-WHO, 2007; Park et al, 2012) which relies upon the Environment and Health integrated approach (EEA, 2013; WHO, 2012b).

Objectives

This paper reports on the environmental health literacy activities performed within the ongoing Italian national research project Asbestos, funded by the Ministry of Health and coordinated by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (www.iss.it/amianto). We discuss the innovation of including information literacy in the project together with the impact on training and dissemination activities performed in different countries and targeted to different stakeholders.

Methodology

The Asbestos research project includes training and dissemination activity. The methodology is based on the NECOBELAC FP7 project and associated initiatives. Environmental health literacy (EHL) is implemented in those countries where asbestos mining or use is still permitted or recently banned. The EHL activities consist of: (i) conferences and seminars attended by health professionals and researchers, social scientists and decision-makers, workers; (ii) dissemination of multi-lingual technical-scientific reports, information on available scientific sources and normative documentation; (iii) training for improving open access publication on asbestos; and (iv) on-line diffusion of tutorials in local languages.

Outcomes

The Asbestos research project performed training and dissemination activities in Latin American countries. Free multimedia and multi-lingual (Italian, Spanish and English) dissemination material including articles, reports, videos, power point presentations was published and is available on the project website. The activities were dedicated to improving knowledge and awareness on occupational and environmental hazardous exposures and the prevention of asbestos-related diseases, as well as on the global and local burden of such diseases. Health information literacy was shown to have increased critical thinking on asbestos hazardous exposures and related diseases, as well as the access, use and re-use of quality scientific information among different stakeholders, particularly university students including doctoral students, and on policy makers.

Conclusions

The asbestos case testifies to the links between public health, environment and socio-economic development. It confirms the need to address environmental health literacy through a cross-disciplinary approach. The Italian experience on asbestos, contributes to fostering the prevention of asbestos-related diseases in other countries and facilitates informed and appropriate decisions to support proactive approaches to healthy living and for environmental practice.

References


Keywords: environmental health literacy, information literacy, cross-disciplinary approach, asbestos, international cooperation