

# California Media Campaigns Work for Healthy Infants

BY RHODA WEISS

**O**ver the past 18 months, the California Department of Health Services has created two new healthcare media campaigns to improve prenatal care and raise infant immunization rates. The result of collaboration between marketing and communications professionals and supportive government officials, these two campaigns are changing health outcomes in the state.

## A DASH OF SALT-N-PEPA

The BabyCal prenatal care campaign's use of rap music stars Salt-N-Pepa to reach low-income expectant mothers throughout the state, particularly African-American women and women of other ethnic groups, debuted in April 1996. The BabyCal Perinatal Outreach Program had reduced statewide infant mortality by 15 percent over the previous five years, but had not had a major impact in the African-American community. Then BabyCal's former public relations team leader Greg Waskul, at the time a senior managing director at the public relations firm of Hill and Knowlton, created "Every Baby Is a Star," a press event designed to reach young African-American expectant mothers. California Secretary of Health and Welfare Sandra Smoley, RN, and Director of the Department of Health Services Kim Belshe approved Waskul's idea in three days. For the event, Waskul's public relations team created a Salt-N-Pepa poster and public service announcements with a hip-hop feel. They also set up a satellite tour for the stars and Smoley and held the press event on a Hollywood sound stage. More than 200 media hits followed the event.

The two Salt-N-Pepa PSAs have been phenomenally successful, receiving more air time in California over the past 18 months than any other PSA. They have also aired nationally. The music



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stars appeal directly to the targeted audience, telling them, "Don't drink, don't smoke, and don't do drugs." More than 100,000 pregnant women have called the ad's toll-free number for help with prenatal care issues.

"Every dollar spent on prenatal care saves more than three dollars in medical expenses for unhealthy babies, which is why this outreach program is so important," said Smoley. "The program is now reaching a huge number of California women." California now has the lowest infant death rate among the 10 largest states. In fact, California's infant mortality rate declined across the board in 1996, highlighted by a drop of more than 10 percent in the African-American community. This represented the largest one-year decline in African-American infant mortality in the history of the state.

"The Salt-N-Pepa solution showed that teaming with spokespeople who related directly to the target audience could be a highly effective tactic for changing behavior in the community," Waskul said.

## BUILDING BETTER IMMUNIZATION RATES

California has recently launched another ambitious campaign to increase infant immunization rates. Although immunization rates in California have risen over the past four years, they still rank 45th among the 50 states. A major reason for the low rates is that more than two-thirds of mothers do not understand the immunization schedule. The new Waskul-created campaign is Blocks of Life. Its logo features building blocks with the "2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 12 months and 15 months" immunization dates emblazoned on them, stacked in a pattern specifically designed to be easy to remember.

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*Care* is a major asset. Unlike so much literature in gerontology, the book is clear, straightforward, and well focused on practical issues, while maintaining a high standard of scholarship throughout. Both academics and service professionals will find it extremely useful. My single stylistic quibble involves the index, which should include more entries, especially geographic names.

The content is excellent but necessarily has its shortcomings, given the broad subject matter. Although the book provides essential background on the history, economics, and politics of long-term care, a wider perspective is needed. Anyone seriously dedicated to reforming long-term care must understand the relevance of the far-reaching, persistent problems in American society, of which the book's focus is but one small expression.

For example, the reader is left wondering how the long-term care industry will manage to provide better trained personnel (one of the book's recommendations) when underpaid nursing aides, often from urban ghettos, now perform most of the work. The observation that "tomorrow's elderly will be wealthier" ignores the increasing gap between rich and poor people and the current trend to exclude certain populations from services. It would be more correct to say that "a few of tomorrow's elderly will be enormously wealthy; the sicker majority will be as poor as ever." Many references are made to community-based and home-based care, but none to the problems of crime and environmental degradation, which are among the most serious obstacles to these solutions.

We hope that long-term care, along with many other societal obligations, can be improved without a total overhaul of the society. The broader conditions just mentioned would seem to limit the options, however, and could be an appropriate subject of a supplemental book.

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## MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

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# The communications programs position California to give babies the best possible start in life.

Every major branch of the California Department of Health Services participated on the Blocks for Life team, as well as the California Healthcare Association, the California Medical Association, and the California Association of Health Plans. The Blocks for Life materials include posters, magnets, t-shirts, immunization innovation awards, and a parent's promise certificate, to be given to new parents while their baby is still in the hospital. Materials are produced in both English and Spanish, to reach nearly 90 percent of the state's parents of infants. A popular television PSA was also done in both languages.

The immunization campaign was formally launched in April 1997 at Long Beach Memorial Medical Center. Guests of honor were the Shier quintuplets, who were born in early 1996 at Long Beach Memorial and who were about to receive their 15-month inoculations.

Community organizations and county health departments throughout the state were eager to add Blocks of Life items to their immunization materials. In the months since April, thousands of pieces with the new logo have been distributed to hospitals, doctors' offices, and clinics. People from more than 30 other states are interested in adapting the campaign for their areas.

The BabyCal and Blocks of Life communications programs position California to give babies and infants the best possible start in life. □

## FINAL SAY

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# Joy comes from our belief that God is faithful.

the world from God's creative love."<sup>2</sup>  
 This is what we are trying to do in our faith institution, so that God's creative love will present hopeful alternatives.

To create something new, we have to constantly live in the center, in that healthy tension between hope and realism, ministry and business. This quest for a new creation arises from faith and is sustained by hope. Hope is not naive optimism, but rather the conviction that God is at work in the world. Through this hope we speak to a broken world of God's justice, and God's kindness.

Being faithful to that vision of hope in our discordant society requires us to have courage. That courage comes from a conviction that everything is going to go well. We have a deep faith that God is with us, and an interior joy that comes from knowing we are not, ultimately, responsible. We are not the Messiah. We are ministers.

Joy also comes from our belief that God is faithful, and that our struggle to follow Christ—not our success—is what will bring God's reign of love to the world. We rejoice in the invitation to join in the struggle—to seek justice, to be compassionate, and to reflect mercy, which God gives unconditionally to the world. □

## NOTES

1. Charles M. Johnston, *Necessary Wisdom: Meeting the Challenge of a New Cultural Maturity*, ICD Press, Seattle, 1991.
2. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Economic Justice for All," U.S. Catholic Conference, Washington, DC, 1986.