

## WhatsApp as a Public Health Management Tool in India

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**Abstract :** Background: WhatsApp can serve as a cost-effective, scalable, convenient, and popular medium for public health management related communication in the developing world where the existing system of communication is top-down and slow. The product supports sending and receiving a variety of media: text, photos, videos, documents, and location, as well as voice/video calls. With growing number of users of smartphones and improving access and penetration of internet, the scope of information technology remains immense in resolving the hurdles faced by traditional public health system. Poor infrastructure, gap in digital literacy, faulty documentation, strict organizational hierarchy and slow movement of information across desks and offices- all these, make WhatsApp an efficient prospect to complement the existing system for communication, feedback and leadership for public health system in India. Objective: This study investigates the benefits, challenges and limitations associated with WhatsApp usage as a public health management tool. Methods: The study was conducted within the Chandigarh Union Territory. We used a qualitative approach and conducted individual semi-structured interviews and group interviews (n = 10). Participants included medical officers (n 20), Program managers (n = 4), academicians (n=2) and administrators (n=2). Thematic and content qualitative analyses were conducted. Message log of the WhatsApp group of one of the health program was assessed. Results: Medical Officers said that WhatsApp helped them remain in touch with the program officer. They could easily give feedback and highlight those challenges which needed immediate intervention from the program managers, hence they felt supported. Also, the application helped them share pictures of their activities (meetings and field activities) with the group which they thought inspired others and gave themselves immense satisfaction. Also, it helped build stronger relationships and better coordination among themselves, the same being important in team events. For program managers, it had become a portal for coordinating large scale campaigns. Its reach and the fact that the feedback is real-time make WhatsApp ideal for district level events. Though the easy informal connectivity made them answerable to their staff but it also provided them with flexibility in operations. It turned out to be an important portal for sharing outcome and goals related feedback (both positive and negative) to the team. To be sure, using WhatsApp for the purpose of public health program presents considerable challenges, including technological barriers, organizational challenges, gender issues, confidentiality concerns and unplanned aftereffects. Nevertheless, its advantages in a low-cost setting make it an efficient alternative. Conclusion: WhatsApp has become an integral part of our lives. Use of this app for public health program management within closed groups looks promising and useful. At the same time, addressing the challenges involved would make its usage safer.

**Keywords :** communication, mobile technology, public health management, WhatsApp

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