


Thumbnail Image:




Using Celebrity Diplomacy to End Tuberculosis ^[1]

Earlier this year, London's mayor Boris Johnson appointed Emma Thompson as his Tuberculosis (TB) Ambassador in an effort to raise awareness of the disease. The international STOP TB Partnership applauded her appointment because she has used her personal experience to speak passionately about TB. Other observers felt that the choice seemed appropriate given the large number of cases in Thompson's native city, London.

Since her appointment, Emma Thompson has been successful in generating awareness about the stigma TB patients face in London and in other parts of the world. She has also persuasively argued for the need for new medicines. In a video recently posted online by the mayor's office, Thompson stated: "We do need to put pressure on government and pharmaceuticals to really focus on this disease because...[TB] is becoming so resistant to most of the antibiotics that, if we don't act now, it will become a worldwide pandemic that will not respect status, countries, or your bank balance."

Public diplomacy scholars have studied the multilateral and non-governmental organizations' use of famous individuals to generate awareness of international issues. University of Waterloo Professor Andrew Cooper, author of Celebrity Diplomacy, has stated that some celebrities have been successful in using their fame to engage with government officials and organizations on the behalf of others. In his book, Cooper describes how goodwill ambassadors and other celebrity diplomats are not only able to draw attention to global issues, but also have the ability to promote meaningful change. In Cooper's view, "Mainstream celebrity diplomats  are most valuable when they're building momentum, building enthusiasm for issues."

"[TB] is becoming so resistant to most of the antibiotics that, if we don't act now, it will become a worldwide pandemic that will not respect status, countries, or your bank balance."

In contrast, London Metropolitan University Professor Mark Wheeler points out that there have been many instances when the use of celebrities turned out to be unsuccessful or divisive. However, Wheeler also recognizes that the celebrities' "...fame  has been vital in achieving access to influential circles of diplomatic power."

Thompson is not the first celebrity to work on TB. In 2010, the STOP TB Partnership appointed R&B singer and songwriter Craig David to serve as its Goodwill Ambassador. His goal was "to raise awareness about TB among his millions of fans worldwide." At the

beginning of his tenure, Executive Secretary of the Stop TB Partnership Marcos Espinal stated that David could “...reach people all over the world with messages of hope about our ability to cure TB, and the need to step up the fight against this devastating disease, which causes suffering and death everywhere.” During his tenure, David visited communities in South Africa that are heavily affected by TB and spoke of his experiences in both traditional and social media.

Celebrity diplomacy may not be without drawbacks, but it can help public health professionals counter the common but completely incorrect perception of TB as a “disease of the past.” Ending the suffering caused by TB will require the immediate use of every means possible. As Emma Thompson put it, we need to act now before it's too late.

Photo by Garry Knight/ CC by-SA 2.0
