

**Seminar on 28 August 2009, 12:30pm**

**Action Research and the promotion of informed choice in  
Breast Cancer Screening: A U.K. perspective**

**by Dr Lai Fong Marguerita Chiu**

**Abstract**

The U.K. Breast Cancer Screening Programme was introduced by the NHS in 1999. The programme has since committed to ensuring all women receive sufficient information to make informed choices on screening. To this end, much effort has been made to produce a variety of information (in different media and languages) about the programme and the screening procedure. The programme has also invested substantial funding in research and development of information and communication. As a practitioner in the public health department of a local health authority, the author of this paper was the first to lead a national action research project to address the issue of promoting breast screening messages to minority ethnic women. This project gave birth to the Community Health Educator Model in public health, as well as provided a foundation for the development of Action Research in public health.

Between 1994 and the present, three more action research projects aiming to address the information and communication issues of breast screening from different perspectives and settings have been commissioned. This consistent funding stream is a rare opportunity that has not only allowed the author to deepen her understanding of the issue through an iterative process of action and critical reflection, but also the building of a participatory culture that is essential for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of health promotion practice.

This paper introduces the action research approach to address issues of promoting access and informed choice in breast cancer screening. The philosophical groundings of AR, its concepts and tools for improving both theory and practice will be outlined using exemplars extracted from the four research projects. It argues that the AR approach has the potential for innovating and transforming research/practice in public health, beyond the breaking down of information and communication barriers. However, the development of AR and its full potential as a vehicle for engaging and empowering communities and citizens can be restricted by many factors that are inherent in the present health system. Some of these will be discussed.

## **Dr Lai Fong Marguerita Chiu**

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A self-educated migrant, Lai Fong gained her entry to high education through the Open University as a mature student. She obtained her first degree in Communication Studies in Sheffield, and went on to gain her higher degrees from both Manchester and Leeds Medical Schools while her career unfolded through posts of community worker, health promotion specialist/researcher and senior health service manager in the NHS. With her passion to develop Action Research in Health, she entered academia in 2001 as a Senior Research Fellow of the Nuffield Institute for Health, University of Leeds. She recently joined the Academic Unit of Public health of Leeds Institute of Health Sciences and has developed a distinctive approach to the teaching of health promotion and participatory action research in public health, as well as continuing to pursue her research interests.

Lai Fong is the originator and developer of the Community Health Educator Model for public health in the U.K. Cumulative financial support for this model, mostly from the NHS cancer screening programmes, is close to £0.5 million. The model won the NHS Beacon Award in 2000 and has been adopted across many health districts to address a variety of health issues since 1993. The Yorkshire and Humber Region-wide Altogether Better Project which has received £6.8 million from the National Lottery is based on the CHE model.

Lai Fong has published academic papers, book chapters and training materials on various topics related to cancer screening and minority ethnic communities and low-income groups. She has presented numerous papers at both national and international conferences on subjects such as access and cancer screening, social networks, and action research. She is a member of the panel of referees for NHS research programmes (National Institute for Health Research, NHS R&D Health Technology Assessment Programme, NHS Service Delivery and Organisation Programme). She is currently an advisory member of the WHO Task Force on Migrant friendly and Culturally Competent Hospitals and the co-ordinator of the working group on Patient and Community Empowerment of the Task Force; an advisory member of the Regional Advisory Forum of the Altogether Better project; advisory member of the ESRC Exploring cross-cultural value of informed choice; member of the Race Forum of the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). She is also an associate editor (health) of the Action Research journal.