

Pandemic Influenza Communications Exercise

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Adapted from materials from the US Department of Health and Human Services



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Issue

- If the news tomorrow is that a pandemic virus has emerged, are we as communicators in a global community prepared?



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Purpose

- Coordinate pandemic influenza health messages across ministries within each country.
- Coordinate communications activities with communication staff members at the local level.
- Respond quickly to rumors and inaccurate information to minimize concern, social disruption, and stigmatization.
- Coordinate international information exchange and communication strategies.



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Objectives

- Discuss awareness of immediate first actions and contact procedures.
- Assess potential communications issues arising from global media attention.
- Identify gaps or additional interagency coordination requirements.
- Promote advanced risk communications planning among communicators.



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Background Documents

- WHO Outbreak Communication Guidelines
- WHO Handbook for Journalists: Influenza Pandemic
- Creacion de una estrategia de comunicacion para la influenza aviar y la influenza pandemica (OPS/Brennan)
- Lanard and Sandman: Crisis Communication: A Very Quick Introduction
- Diez cosas que hay que saber sobre la pandemia (OMS)



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Scenario

- You are a group of communicators from various ministries. In 2005, facing the threat of pandemic influenza, you started to work together, share information and create communication strategies for the National Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Plans. You meet about once a month to update each other on communication activities. You also are part of a regional and global network of journalists. All of you have agreed to exchange information and messages surrounding pandemic preparation, prevention, response and recovery. There have been cases of avian influenza in birds and in some humans for years. You feel that you, as a communicator, are prepared. But you are not sure how events will unfold when the day comes to turn communication strategies into action plans.



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Part 1: Monday – July 17, 2008

- The World Health Organization posts an update on its Web site announcing the 20th confirmed human case of avian influenza in China.
- The report notes that the case is most likely another rare instance of human to human transmission, as no other non-human source of infection can be identified.
- The Pandemic Alert Level remains at Level 3.



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Tuesday – July 18, 2008

- A 68-year-old Canadian citizen who lives in Ottawa and had recently traveled to Southeast Asia dies in a hospital in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil while vacationing with his family.
- The man had been diagnosed with influenza, but he had had a history of other respiratory health problems. Hospital staff members consider the death as nothing particularly unusual.
- The Canadian Embassy in Brazil is notified. A journalist in Brazil hears about the story.



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Thursday – July 20, 2008

- At 9:45 a.m. Eastern Time the Hong Kong bureau of the Associated Press publishes a story reporting that an outbreak of an unusually severe respiratory illness has occurred near the city of Guangzhou.
- The AP report cites several local officials who confirm that at least 250 people have died within the past 10 days in the area.
- Within hours, the news of the reported outbreak becomes the lead story on major news networks and Web sites around the globe.
- Local journalists call the Ministry of Health. A Bolivian man who maintains a health blog puts up the story that a pandemic is imminent.
- The communicators from the ministries get together to discuss the events and prepare actions.



Part 1: Group Discussion

- Which entities within your national government have the lead roles with respect to coordination and information at this time? What does your communications office need to do to contribute to and help ensure effective coordination of public messaging?
- What gaps are evident in information production and, especially, in coordination? What do your communication offices need to do to engage more closely with the response efforts and activities?
- What are the basic risk communications messages to deliver? Who will/should deliver the message?
- What is your strategy for communicating with the public at this point, and/or a course of action to recommend?



Part 2 – July 21, 2008

- Upon seeing the news story from Hong Kong, a nurse at the Rio de Janeiro hospital who cared for the Canadian patient calls a Brazilian journalist about the death.
- She tells the journalist that during a casual conversation with the patient, she learned that he was in Brazil on vacation to relax from his recent business trip to Hong Kong and Guangzhou.



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Friday – July 21, 2008

- The reporter in Rio de Janeiro makes a series of calls to investigate, including local hospital and health ministry officials, PAHO, WHO, the CDC in Atlanta and a journalist friend who lives in Hong Kong and works for the CNN bureau there.
- At 4:00 p.m. Eastern time, CNN reports on the Brazil case, linking that case as possibly connected to the China outbreak.
- Journalists worldwide are starting to speculate on the spread of infection and seeking to lay blame on governments.
- Your ministers are demanding information on what to say later that day on a government-run television station. The president had planned a news conference to discuss a new policy but now fears he will have to discuss an imminent pandemic.
- The media are broadcasting stories with televised shots taken in front of hospitals.



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Part 2: Group Discussion

- What is your strategy for communicating with the public at this point, and/or a course of action to recommend?
- Which entities within your government have the lead roles with respect to coordination and information at this time? What does your part of the communications community need to do to contribute to and help ensure effective coordination of public messaging?
- What gaps are evident in information production and, especially, in coordination? What do your ministries communicators need to do to engage more closely with the planned pandemic response activities?
- What parts of the WHO Outbreak Communication Guidelines did you use? What are the basic risk communications messages to deliver? Who will/should deliver the message?



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Part 3: Saturday – July 22, 2008

- The World Health Organization announces that it is sending teams to China and to Brazil to investigate but holds off on raising the Pandemic Alert Level.
- The media start to report that calls to airlines and cruise ship lines are increasing rapidly from customers cancelling their trips to the Brazil.
- The Brazilian Minister of Tourism tells the media that a major reduction to the travel industry could rapidly threaten the viability of the economies of many South American nations.
- Tabloid newspapers speculate that their governments are withholding life-saving information.



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Sunday – July 23, 2008

- The recently appointed Canadian Minister of Health, fearing another SARS-like panic, quickly announces that a global pandemic is upon us and that Canada will ban all flights originating from Brazil or Southeast Asia.
- Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia and Peru close the borders with Brazil and announce they will quarantine flights originating in Brazil and Southeast Asia.
- Under the pressure of public demand, most other countries throughout the Americas follow suit.



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Part 3: Group Discussion

- What is your communication advice to your minister? What does your communication office contribute to and help ensure effective coordination of public messaging?
- What messages will you use? What is the basis of that decision?
- What are the basic risk communications messages to deliver? Who will/should deliver the message?
- What is your strategy for communicating with the public at this point, and/or a course of action to recommend?
- What does the lead paragraph of your news release say?



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Part 4: Tuesday – August 1, 2008

- The WHO announces Phase 5 after large clusters of human infection are reported throughout Asia, the Middle East and parts of Africa. Isolated cases appear in Mexico, Canada and Brazil. This development suggests that the virus is adapting to humans.
- Journalists in Asia claim that economic collapse is more likely than a pandemic. Media in South America claim the virus is spreading by the water.
- The governments exchange information about how to act and react.



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Monday – August 31, 2008

- The Director General of the WHO declares a Phase 6 Pandemic due to increased and sustained transmission of a new human-to-human virus. In the Andean countries, the first wave claims 8,000 deaths. The vast numbers of sick and dying overwhelm the health services.
- The media have no knowledge of the National Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Plans (NIPPS) and confuse the public with misinformation. In some parts of the Americas the media has titled the Pandemic as the Brazilian Killer Flu.
- Groups gather outside hospitals to demand action. Schools close. Riots break out at a local pharmaceutical plant.



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Monday – August 31, 2008 (Continued)

- Radio broadcasts report widespread anger, with protests in most of the federal capitals.
- People living in the border areas claim they are starving because delivery trucks are stalled at the borders.
- Television starts broadcasting interviews about bodies stacking up at local hospitals. Opposition politicians criticize the government's handling of the Pandemic and call for the president's resignation.



Part 4: Group Discussion

- At this point, what are the roles of the communicators? How are you working with the political and technical experts?
- What are your suggested basic risk communications messages? How did you decide? Who will deliver the message?
- What channels of communication have you chosen to use?
- What does your news release say in the first paragraph?
- How are you communicating with your international colleagues?
- What is your strategy for correcting rumors and misinformation?
- How will you evaluate the communication work?

