

Pandemic Influenza Communications Exercise

Facilitator's Guide and Lessons Learned

Issue:

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

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.

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.

Background Documents:

- WHO Outbreak Communication Guidelines
- WHO Handbook for Journalists: Influenza Pandemic
- Creating a Communication Strategy for Avian/Pandemic Influenza (PAHO/Brennan)
- Lanard and Sandman: Crisis Communication: A Very Quick Introduction
- Ten things you need to know about Pandemic Influenza (WHO)

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.

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?

Exercise Time: 10 minutes deliberation. Five minutes to respond.

Part 1. Facilitator Notes

- At this point we know that a story by the AP was published but we do not have sources identified.
- The 250 deaths over 10 days are from a severe respiratory illness, we do not know anything more.
- Unusual deaths at a time when the world is in a global pandemic alert can and will result in calls to local ministries of health.
- The Bolivian man who maintains a health blog is not an expert. He does, however, keep track of unusual health events and puts them on his web site without verifying the sources. We should not respond to every rumor.
- The government should already have in place a communication strategy in line with the national pandemic preparedness plans. This plan should cut across ministries.
- The communication office should be aware of the news and prepare talking points, even if they point out that the news is unconfirmed. There should not necessarily be a news release.
- As a group of communicators you should share whatever information you have on the situation.
- It most likely would be too early to determine if there are gaps in your plans. Drills and simulations should be held as part of the national pandemic preparedness planning.
- Any releases or comments should be in reaction to questions and use risk communication messages, such as empathy, sharing dilemmas.
- The official spokesperson should deliver any messages (and not someone higher) at this point.
- The best strategy would be to respond to media questions and recommend that the authorities stay informed.

Part 1. Total Time: 35 minutes

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?

Exercise Time: 15 minutes deliberation. Five minutes to respond.

Part 2. Facilitator Notes

- Don't discount that the nurse in Rio de Janeiro may be a friend of the Brazilian journalist she called. News often comes from unlikely sources. Also, the nurse may have been worried about her own health.
- We assume that when CNN links the Brazil case to the China outbreak that there was additional information that we still do not have.
- Journalists are reacting to a "hot" story. The government at this point must put part of its prepared communication strategy into action.
- Communicators should prepare talking points, taking into consideration public concern, pressure on public health infrastructures, rumors, vulnerable publics who want quick and accurate information.
- Communicators should follow WHO Outbreak Guidelines, aiming for trust, announcing early, transparency, the public and planning.
- We need to anticipate that the media will seek footage in front of hospitals and even show shots of patients being taken to hospitals.
- The lead spokesperson should be the one to respond.
- Relook at plan to look for gaps.
- Take advantage that the story is in the news to promote prevention and preparation in the public.

Part 2. Total Time: 35 minutes

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?

Exercise Time: 15 minutes deliberation. Five minutes to respond.

Part 3. Facilitator Notes

- You need to continue to act according to your communication plan. You need responses and evidence-based comments from the ministries of tourism and economy.
- You should prepare factual statements based on the current evidence produced by the World Health Organization to counter rumors.
- The Canadian minister, according to the International Health Regulations, cannot announce a pandemic, only the Director-General of WHO can do that.
- Advice to minister should be to follow WHO outbreak guidelines, stressing transparency and let the public know what the government is doing and why.
- Use the Sandman/Lanard recommendations,
 - Don't overreassure
 - Express information in subordinate clause
 - Don't be alarmist
 - Recognize doubt
 - Share dilemmas
 - Acknowledge diverse opinions
 - Don't plan for zero fear
 - Tolerate early overreactions
 - Show your humanity
 - Tell people what to expect
 - Offer people things they can do
 - Recognize errors
 - Don't like or tell half-truths
 - Seek transparency

Part 3. Total Time: 40 minutes

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?

Exercise Time: 10 minutes deliberation. Five minutes to respond.

Part 4. Facilitator Notes

Actions that the communicators should take:

- Use outbreak and risk communication tactics and guidelines.
- Activate Phase 6 of the communication plan.
- Issue official news releases regularly and set up a situation room for communication.
- Send out prepared messages to the public – via media, Internet, radio, blog, text messaging – of what is going on and what will be a rapid progression of actions and urgent measures to take in daily life, such as staying at home with a fever, when to go to the hospital, what to do in the case of deaths, and the management of dead bodies.
- Communication should be put into place to enable quick exchange of information among health sector authorities and other agencies.
- The news releases and statements from the minister or presidency should provide clear and transparent information about the threat, what actions the government is taking and what measures are contemplated.
- Keep the media informed about the progression of the pandemic in the affected countries; prepare the public for the imminent start of pandemic activities.
- Activate a 24-hour hotline and provide ongoing information through television, radio and/or Internet.
- Recognize the anxiety in the general public and the need to know what is going on in order to take decisions.
- Use all means of communication channels, including schools, faith-based groups, associations and civil society, among other things to quell and correct rumors.
- There will be a need to refine messages to the realities, plant reasonable expectations among the public and emphasize the need to respect public health measures, with all their limitations.
- Plan for recovery.

Part 4. Total Time: 35 minutes

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

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