An Overview of Risk Communication

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Public Health Emergencies

• High economic and social impact
• Alarm in the population uncertainty, fear, anger, anxiety = demand for timely, clear, useful information
• Differing views and perceptions among officials and the public
• Rumors
Mixed messages from officials = alarm, lack of trust

- Are we going to die?
- Is the military going to help out?
- Are they going to evacuate the village?
- Will the schools be closed?
- Who’s going to help us? What do we do?
- Do we need masks? How do we get them?
- Do we need vaccines?
• Growing media interest = sensationalism
• International media
• Rapid transmission via internet and social networks
• Information gaps – filled by unofficial news sources
• Direct involvement of political actors
Role of Risk Communication During Public Health Emergencies

• Help at risk populations make informed decisions
• Encourage protective behaviors – public and health care workers
• Complement existing surveillance systems
• Coordinate health and non-health partners
• Minimize social and economic disruption
• Build the trust required to prepare for, respond to and recover from serious public health threats
Risk Communication

Risk communication is an integral component of public health risk management. It is focused on dialogue with those affected and concerned and strives to ensure communication strategies are evidence based.

Under the IHR, risk communication for public health emergencies includes the range of communication capacities required through the preparedness, response and recovery phases of a serious public health event to encourage informed decision making, positive behavior change and the maintenance of trust.
Components
- Put together risk comm team
- Internal coordination
- Strategic alliances
- Risk communication plan
- Staff training
- Prepare messages
- Media Plan
- Communication surveillance
- Staffing plan

CRISIS

Opportunity for Control

Activate crisis plan, etc.

Evaluation

- Evaluate work
- Document lessons learned
- Identify actions for improvement

PAHO Model 2010
• The risks that kill people and the risks that scare them are two different things.

• People respond to perceived risk.
A new “definition” of risk:

Risk = Hazard + Outrage

(Peter Sandman’s formula)
High hazard/low outrage

- Mass Media
  - Indifferent Public
  - Specialists

- Hazard
  - Perception

- Mass Media
  - Clear messages
  - Health education
  - Security training
  - Environmental activism
1. High Hazard, Low Outrage

Public relations/ health education

- Audience: apathetic, aren’t interested, getting their attention is quite difficult
- Need to increase outrage and concern
- Task: messages that reinforce appeals to move the audience towards your goals, provoke more outrage – action
- Medium: mass media to provoke action
- Barriers: audience inattention, size, media resistance
Stakeholder Relations

Interested public

Interpersonal dialogue
- Specialized media
- Newsletters
- Respond to questions, doubts
- Explain technical details
- Web chat

Specialists

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2. Moderate Hazard, Moderate Outrage

Stakeholder relations

• Audience: stakeholders – interested and attentive audience, neither too apathetic or too upset to listen

• Task: to discuss, explain, respond to the audience/stakeholder

• Medium: dialogue, supplemented by specializes media

• Barriers: inefficiency of one on one dialogue
Low Hazard and High Perception of Risk and Outrage

- Reduce the perception
- Acknowledge errors
- Share control
- Ask forgiveness
- Listen

Talk to the people

Specialists

Outraged public
High Outrage/Low Hazard

outrage management

• Audience: ‘outraged – anger, largely at you, ‘fanatics’, (justified or not) you have their attention

• Task: reduce audience outrage – listen, recognize errors, apologize, share control and credit

• Medium: in person dialogue, audience does most of the talking

• Barriers: outrage
Crisis Communication

- Recognize uncertainty
- Avoid excessive confidence
- Share the dilemma
- Show your humanity and empathy
- Offer things to do

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4. High Hazard, High Outrage

crisis communication – in a crisis there is no ‘PUBLIC,’ everyone is a stakeholder

• Audience: very upset, outraged – more fear and misery than anger

• Task: to help the audience bear its fear, concern and suffering. Recognize uncertainty. Avoid excess confidence. Demonstrate your humanity, show empathy. Seek public participation.

• Medium: monologue via the mass media, dialogue – one on one where possible

• Barriers: stress of the crisis, missing the difference between crisis communication and routine
WHO Outbreak Communication Guidelines
For Public Health Authorities: WHO Risk Communication Principles

• Trust
• Transparency
• Early announcement
• Listening, communication surveillance
• Planning = Risk Comm. Strategy
Trust

• Trust is earned before a crisis
• Need to take actions that maintain trust
• Enables population to take appropriate actions.
• Recognize uncertainty, avoid false hopes
• Include the public in decisions, actions
Transparency

• Explain the decision-making process

• Aim for total candor

• Key to maintaining confidence; linked to the quality, veracity and clarity of the information.

• Limits to transparency, balance rights and information
Arguments For Transparency

• Rumors fill the information void
• Promotes protective behavior
• Keeps you out front as the information provider
• You can’t hide outbreaks
• Social media take control
Early Announcement

- The opportunity to make the “first announcement” leads to trust, reduces rumors and can save lives.
- Acknowledge that the situation will change when there is more information.
- Shows leadership
- The lack of information is NOT a reason to put off the first announcement of a real or suspected outbreak.
- Inform of what you know, what you are doing, and what you want the public to do.
Communication Surveillance and Listening

• Is the public worried and in need or reassurance?
• Is the public too calm and in need of warning?
• Are they angry and in need of calming?
• Crisis + heightened public emotions + limited access to facts + rumor, gossip, speculation, assumption, and inference = an unstable information environment, panic, bad decisions, danger, credibility
Planning

• Risk communication part of the preparation for all public health emergencies.
• Eliminates the crisis decisions
• A National Risk Communication Strategy includes a crisis plan
Conclusions

- Risk communication is not a news release, poster or public relations.

- Understanding and analyzing real and perceived risk is fundamental for the development of a risk communication strategy.

- If the public doesn’t perceive a risk, they won’t respond adequately to prevent it. The perception also can impede the response.

- Risk communication must include the public, the community, in their own languages and cultural norms.

- Need to avoid stigmatization.