

Effective Media Communication during Public Health Emergencies

A WHO FIELD GUIDE



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PREFACE

We have had great success in the [last] five years in controlling outbreaks, but we have only recently come to understand that communications are as critical to outbreak control as laboratory analyses or epidemiology.

Dr Jong-wook Lee, Director-General, WHO, 21 September 2004

Until the outbreak of an exotic communicable disease or other dramatic event, the elaborate infrastructures and mechanisms that protect public health on a daily basis often go unnoticed and attract little media interest. In the midst of a public health emergency the situation becomes very different as the demand for information rapidly escalates. Only recently has the true extent to which media communication directly influences the course of events been recognized. Good communication can rally support, calm a nervous public, provide much-needed information, encourage cooperative behaviours and help save lives. Poor communication can fan emotions, disrupt economies and undermine confidence.

Recent outbreaks of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian influenza, releases of anthrax and sarin, and natural disasters such as the South-East Asian tsunami, underline the importance of communication during public health emergencies. Communication challenges are particularly pronounced when fear of a naturally occurring or deliberately released pathogen spreads faster and further than the resulting disease itself. In such situations, policy-makers, the news media and the public all expect timely and accurate information. It is vital that people feel that officials are communicating openly and honestly. The most important asset in any large-scale public health emergency is the public because ultimately they must take care of themselves. Through effective media communication, public health officials can engage the public and help them to make informed and better decisions.

Such effective media communication requires trust and understanding between public health officials and the media. The media depend on public health officials for timely and accurate information. Public health officials depend on the media to get their messages out before, during and after an emergency. They also use the media as a surveillance system. For these reasons, each side depends upon the other to be successful. The media should therefore be viewed both as a crucial means of conveying information and as a component of outbreak surveillance.

Effective media communication is in fact a crucial element in effective emergency management and should assume a central role from the start. It establishes public confidence in the ability of an organization or government to deal with an emergency, and to bring about a satisfactory conclusion. Effective media communication is also integral to the larger process of information exchange aimed at eliciting trust and promoting understanding of the relevant issues or actions. Within the limits of available knowledge, good media communication aids such efforts by:

- building, maintaining or restoring trust;
- improving knowledge and understanding;
- guiding and encouraging appropriate attitudes, decisions, actions and behaviours; and
- encouraging collaboration and cooperation.

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INTRODUCTION

Effectively communicating information during public health emergencies on the threats posed and on the actions needed remains a significant and highly difficult challenge. Such communication not only needs to be carefully planned and implemented but must also be properly integrated with emergency management activities and operations. Emergency events therefore present a unique challenge to the internal media-relations capabilities of health agencies and preparation is vital. It is all too easy to be caught unprepared, especially for short-notice or demanding media interviews. Conversely, well-constructed and properly delivered media messages can inform and calm a worried public, reduce misinformation, and focus attention on what is most important. Communicate badly and one may be perceived as incompetent, uncaring or dishonest. Communicate well and one can reach more people with a clear and credible public health message.

Effective media communication is therefore a key responsibility of public health professionals and information officers, especially during emergencies. This field guide summarizes the practical steps that can be taken to strengthen and enhance efforts made in this area. The guide can act as a rapid primer document as it highlights aspects of media communication activities that are crucial during a public health emergency. The target audiences for this field guide are WHO office and field personnel who are unfamiliar with media interactions or who wish to sharpen their skills in this area. It is also intended to help public health officials in other organizations and networks to deal with the media communication aspects of public health emergencies.

As with the WHO handbook¹ that accompanies this guide, information is presented in accordance with the seven-step process for planning and implementing effective media communication shown in **FIGURE ONE**. Although it covers many issues, this field guide is primarily intended to be a reminder of key points in each of the seven steps. For more in-depth information on any of the steps, the WHO handbook should be consulted.

Even in our widely diverse and culturally rich global community, there are still universal and commonly accepted best practices for communicating effectively through the media. This is supported by a robust scientific evidence base, including the documented consequences of not using best practices. Global best practices and principles should however always be tailored to local needs, and this handbook should be complemented with local and regional media training. Many cultures, for example, rely on folk and traditional means of mass communication which typically originate from the beliefs and customs of a specific population. A guiding principle of effective media communication in a global context is that

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