

Effective Media Communication during Public Health Emergencies

A WHO FIELD GUIDE



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Randall N Hyer MD, PhD, MPH

Medical Officer, Alert and Response Operations
Department of Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response
World Health Organization
Geneva, Switzerland

Vincent T Covello PhD

Director
Center for Risk Communication
New York City
United States of America

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John Clements	Karen Morrione	Belinda Towns
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Peggy Creese	David Nabarro	TE van Deventer
David Degagne	Rafael Obregon	Marsha Vanderford
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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.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES, TABLES, BOXES AND INFORMATION POINTS

2

INTRODUCTION

4

STEP 1: Assess media needs, media constraints, and internal media-relations capabilities

7

1.1: ASSESS THE NEEDS OF THE MEDIA

1.2: ASSESS THE CONSTRAINTS OF THE MEDIA

1.3: ASSESS INTERNAL MEDIA-RELATIONS CAPABILITIES

STEP 2: Develop goals, plans and strategies

13

2.1: DEVELOP MEDIA COMMUNICATION GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

2.2: DEVELOP A WRITTEN MEDIA COMMUNICATION PLAN

2.3: DEVELOP A PARTNER AND STAKEHOLDER STRATEGY

STEP 3: Train communicators

19

3.1: TRAIN THE MEDIA COMMUNICATION TEAM

3.2: TRAIN A PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

3.3: TRAIN A DESIGNATED LEAD SPOKESPERSON

STEP 4: Prepare messages

25

4.1: PREPARE LISTS OF STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR CONCERNS

4.2: PREPARE CLEAR AND CONCISE MESSAGES

4.3: PREPARE TARGETED MESSAGES

STEP 5: Identify media outlets and media activities

33

5.1: IDENTIFY AVAILABLE MEDIA OUTLETS

5.2: IDENTIFY THE MOST EFFECTIVE MEDIA OUTLETS

5.3: IDENTIFY MEDIA ACTIVITIES FOR THE FIRST 24–72 HOURS

STEP 6: Deliver messages

38

6.1: DELIVER CLEAR AND TIMELY MESSAGES

6.2: DELIVER MESSAGES TO MAINTAIN VISIBILITY

6.3: DELIVER TARGETED MESSAGES

STEP 7: Evaluate messages and performance

43

7.1: EVALUATE MESSAGE DELIVERY AND MEDIA COVERAGE

7.2: EVALUATE AND IMPROVE PERFORMANCE BASED ON FEEDBACK

7.3: EVALUATE PUBLIC RESPONSES TO MESSAGES

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1. PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES OF EFFECTIVE MEDIA COMMUNICATION

49

1

LIST OF FIGURES, TABLES, BOXES AND INFORMATION POINTS

INTRODUCTION

FIGURE ONE: SEVEN STEPS TO EFFECTIVE MEDIA COMMUNICATION DURING PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCIES	5
INFORMATION POINT: Cross-cultural sensitivity in message design	6

STEP 1: ASSESS MEDIA NEEDS AND CONSTRAINTS, AND INTERNAL MEDIA-RELATIONS CAPABILITIES

BOX 1.1: 77 MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS BY JOURNALISTS IN AN EMERGENCY	8 and 9
BOX 1.2: MEDIA CONSTRAINTS	10
BOX 1.3: INTERNAL MEDIA-RELATIONS CAPABILITIES – AN ASSESSMENT TOOL	11 and 12

STEP 2: DEVELOP GOALS, PLANS AND STRATEGIES

BOX 2.1: EXAMPLE OF A MEDIA COMMUNICATION GOAL STATEMENT	14
BOX 2.2: BASIC INFORMATION TYPICALLY INCLUDED IN A MEDIA COMMUNICATION PLAN	15
BOX 2.3: ESTABLISHING WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE MEDIA BEFORE AN EMERGENCY OCCURS	17
FIGURE TWO: WORKSHEET FOR IDENTIFYING ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS TO BE CONTACTED DURING AN EMERGENCY	16
INFORMATION POINT: Panic avoidance as a goal	14
INFORMATION POINT: Common mistakes in working with partners	17
INFORMATION POINT: Considerations when developing relationships with partners	18

STEP 3: TRAIN COMMUNICATORS

BOX 3.1: OUTLINE CONTENTS OF A SAMPLE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS TRAINING AGENDA	20
BOX 3.2: MEDIA COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES OF PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS	20
BOX 3.3: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A DESIGNATED LEAD SPOKESPERSON	21
BOX 3.4: PITFALLS TO AVOID WHEN COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA DURING AN EMERGENCY	22
BOX 3.5: NEGATIVELY PERCEIVED NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION	23
BOX 3.6: POSITIVELY PERCEIVED NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION	24

STEP 4: PREPARE MESSAGES

BOX 4.1: EXAMPLES OF STAKEHOLDERS DURING A MAJOR DISEASE OUTBREAK	26
BOX 4.2: POTENTIAL CONCERNS IN A PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY	27
FIGURE THREE: MATRIX OF STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR CONCERNS	28
FIGURE FOUR: MESSAGE MAP TEMPLATE	29
FIGURE FIVE: SAMPLE NEWS RELEASE TEMPLATE	30
INFORMATION POINT: Risk-perception and fear factors	27
INFORMATION POINT: Examples of technical terms used in public health that may not be understood by the public	29
INFORMATION POINT: Contents of a news release	29
INFORMATION POINT: Guidelines for preparing clear and concise messages during public health emergencies	31
INFORMATION POINT: Communicating effectively to individuals experiencing extreme stress or anxiety	31
INFORMATION POINT: Summary guidelines for simplifying interviews, presentations and messages	32

STEP 5: IDENTIFY MEDIA OUTLETS AND MEDIA ACTIVITIES

BOX 5.1: POTENTIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION OUTLETS	34
BOX 5.2: FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN DETERMINING THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAYS OF REACHING TARGET AUDIENCES	34
BOX 5.3: ACTIVITY GUIDELINES FOR THE FIRST 24–72 HOURS AFTER NOTIFICATION AND VERIFICATION OF A PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY	36
<hr/>	
FIGURE SIX: IDENTIFYING AND PROFILING MEDIA OUTLETS	35
FIGURE SEVEN: WORKSHEET FOR TRACKING ENQUIRIES WITHIN THE FIRST 24–72 HOURS OF AN EMERGENCY	37

STEP 6: DELIVER MESSAGES

BOX 6.1: THE 33 MOST FREQUENTLY USED BRIDGING STATEMENTS	39
BOX 6.2: CORRECTING ERRORS IN MEDIA REPORTING	40
BOX 6.3: STRATEGIES FOR DELIVERING TARGETED MESSAGES	40
BOX 6.4: EXAMPLES OF TOPIC-RELATED QUESTIONS TO ASK A REPORTER BEFORE A MEDIA INTERVIEW	41
BOX 6.5: EXAMPLES OF PROCEDURAL QUESTIONS TO ASK A REPORTER BEFORE A MEDIA INTERVIEW	42
<hr/>	
INFORMATION POINT: Contents of a media kit or packet	39
INFORMATION POINT: Holding a news conference	39

STEP 7: EVALUATE MESSAGES AND PERFORMANCE

BOX 7.1: EVALUATING OPENNESS AND TRANSPARENCY OF COMMUNICATIONS	44
BOX 7.2: EVALUATING LISTENING	44
BOX 7.3: EVALUATING CLARITY	45
BOX 7.4: EVALUATION OF MEDIA COVERAGE	46
BOX 7.5: EXAMPLES OF PROCESS EVALUATION MEASURES	46
BOX 7.6: EXAMPLES OF OUTCOME EVALUATION MEASURES	47

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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