Module 6

RISK COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

By the end of the module, the participant should be able to:

- Discuss risk communication in the context of health emergency management
- Describe different risk communication paradigms
- Discuss some principles of risk communication and communication planning
- Describe the role of the media and ways in which to work with the media
- Explain the role of the health emergency manager in risk communication
Q&A:

Would you identify risk communication as one of your key roles as a health emergency manager?

Would you identify risk communication as one of the tools or processes that you use in your capacity as a health emergency manager?

Q&A

What is ‘risk communication’?
Definitions:

Risk Communication is

An ongoing process of bringing together and involving potentially affected “audiences”

- identifying hazards
- quantifying risks
- considering risk management strategies

Q&A

What is the purpose of risk communication?
Purposes of Risk Communication

- Advocacy and policy development
- Information and education (communities, health personnel and decision-makers) to stimulate behaviour change
- Emergency information for action
- Prevent misallocation and wasting of resources
- Decrease illness, injuries and deaths

Risk Communication Planning: Three Paradigms/Types of Risk Communication

1. Precaution, advocacy and warning: e.g. “Watch out”, “Be careful”

2. Fear Management: e.g. “Calm down”, “It’s not what you think”

3. Crisis Communication: e.g. “We’ll get through this together”, “This is what we need to do...”
Risk Communication Planning: The “Risk Communication Environment”

Why type/paradigm of risk communication?

Ask: “What is the ‘communication environment’?”

i.e. is the community…
1. apathetic, passive, in denial, ignoring a serious risk?
2. afraid, overreacting, panicking?
3. in a situation of crisis?

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Risk Communication Planning – Type 1

1. When people are ignoring a serious risk, apathetic, passive, in denial, etc:
   
   - inform people
   
   - mobilise their concern to a level of fear or worry proportionate to the hazard

   - help them to manage the risk, i.e. inform them of “things they can do”, otherwise they will try to manage their fear (by way of denial, apathy, humour, etc.) or they will panic
Example of Risk Communication ‘Type 1’: Info drive on water-borne diseases in Valenzuela

The Valenzuela City health office has launched a massive information drive to warn residents of the possible spread of the water-borne diseases brought by contaminated water and floodwaters during the rainy season - INFORM

Dr. Antonio Olegario, city health office said their attention is now focused on monitoring diseases like leptospirosis, diarrhea, dengue and cholera, which are common ailments usually derived from contaminated drinking water and floodwater - AROUSE CONCERN

Olegario advised the residents to clean their surroundings – especially those living near canals – and beware of disease carriers like rates - “THINGS THEY CAN DO”

Risk Communication Planning

2. When people are afraid, overreacting, panicking, etc. (often due to unfounded or exaggerated fears)

- inform people

- use fear management strategies (correct misunderstandings, reassure without ridiculing fears, discourage overreactions that might have negative consequences, etc.)

- help people to manage the risk - give them “things they can do” so that they do not focus on their emotional reactions
Example of Risk Communication Type 2: Fear Management in Thailand

After unconfirmed reports that several house cats had died of avian flu in Thailand, a spokesperson said this would probably not pose a high risk of spread to humans, explaining that transmission of the disease from cats to humans was unlikely.
Risk Communication Planning: Type 3 – Crisis

3. In a crisis, people’s fear/concern is generally high, while the risks they face are often not exaggerated

- inform: what are the real risks?
- inform: what we (e.g. health authorities) are doing
- inform: what you can do

The message: “we need to work together and we will get through this together”

Elements of Risk Communication

WHO says WHAT to WHOM

through WHAT CHANNELS

with WHAT EFFECTS
WHO: The “Spokesperson”

- Key position
- Media experience
- Responsible, calm and confident
- Ability to speak clearly and convincingly

WHAT: The Message

- What we (authorities) know about the situation
- What ‘we’ (e.g. health authorities) are doing about the situation
- What ‘you’ (the community) can do about the situation
WHAT: Message Development

- Bring it down to the basics: simplify
- Provide recommended actions
- Be positive: provide more “do” than “don’t”
- Don’t lie
- Be sympathetic

To WHOM: The “Audience”

The audience will be the individuals and communities affected by the risk / emergency / disaster
To WHOM: The “Audience”

Some questions:

• Why do people react to risks - real or perceived – the way they do?

• How do we deal with the emotional component of how people respond?

• How do we help people to interpret the risk and respond to risk in constructive ways?

HOW: Communication Channels

*How should the message be communicated?*

*Provide some examples of communication channels.*
HOW: Communication Channels

Mass media
• TV
• Radio
• Newspaper
• Cinema
• Internet

Stand-alone audio-visual
• Video
• Audio
• Multi-media

Audio
• Public address system
• Loudspeakers
• Sirens
HOW: Communication Channels

Telephone
- Mobile
- Telephone tree
- SMS
- Fax

Postal
- Direct mailing

Face-to-face
- Group meetings
- Seminars, workshops, conferences
- Marches
- Exhibitions
- Door to door knocking
- Community leaders
HOW: Communication Channels

Folk Media
- Story telling
- Drama
- Dance
- Song
- Puppet show
- Street entertainment

HOW: Communication Channels

Stand alone print
- Bill boards
- Posters
- Banners

Distributed print
- Leaflets
- Pamphlets
- Brochures
**Principles of Risk Communication**

Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner

- respect the public’s fundamental right to information about risks
- share dilemmas
- share responsibilities to arrive at better choices

**Example: Risk Communication in SARS Crisis, Singapore**

In the middle of the SARS crisis, the Singapore government told the public about internal disagreements about whether to close the schools…

*The government, led by PH Goh, involved the public in government-level dilemmas*
Principles of risk communication

Listen to the public’s concerns

- don’t ridicule the public’s emotions
- legitimise people’s fears
- tolerate early overreactions but warn against their possible negative consequences
- establish yourself as human (can make mistakes)
- speak clearly and with compassion

Principles of Risk Communication

Be honest and open. Do not mislead by providing incomplete or false information

- don’t over-reassure
- err on the alarming side
- acknowledge uncertainty
**Good Example: cautious WHO risk communication during SARS**

“One might think we are overreacting to the cases. But when you do not know the cause, when it strikes hospital staff, and it certainly is moving at the speed of a jet, we are taking this very seriously.”

Early on during the SARS crisis, WHO’s Dick Thompson erred on the alarming side

=> Don't aim for zero fear; err on the alarming side

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**Principles of Risk Communication**

Plan, coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources and partners

- name a “primary” or a “spokesperson”
- establish a network and formal communication channels
- establish regular communication
- work with the media: meet the needs of the media to ensure that they provide accurate and useful information
How can the media assist in emergency and disaster management?

Media as a partner in emergency and disaster management can:

- Assist in pre-crisis education
- Convey warnings
- Convey instructions or other information
- Reassure the public / Deal with the emotions
- Defuse inaccurate information / rumors
- Provide you with updated information
- Solicit and obtain help from others
Q&A:

What strategies can be applied to develop effective working relationships with the mass-media?

Developing effective working relationships with the media

What strategies can be applied to develop effective working relationships with the mass-media?

- One individual or organization has overall responsibility for providing information to the public
- Spokespeople are identified to speak to the mass media for specific topics
- Arrangements are made with electronic and print mass media to advise the public of imminent or actual emergencies
- Messages (and background information) are pre-prepared for specific types of risks and situations
Developing effective working relationships with the media - cont.

- Activities are carried out to build relationships with the mass media, such as participation in planning, seminars and exercises

- Staff training in working with the mass media

- Mass media are informed / aware of roles, responsibilities, national plans, preparedness activities and decision-making processes for all types of risk and the operating practices of organisations, including health organisations

Relating to and working with the media

Past experience has shown the value of immediately dealing with the following points:

- control access to the disaster site

- on-site facilities for issuing passes to media personnel (or accrediting media representatives)

- establishing a media liaison point

- nominating a media spokesperson
Relating to and Working With the Media

Past experience has shown the value of immediately dealing with the following points:

- the media will welcome any factual statements particularly from emergency services' eye witness
- care should be taken that information about casualties is not released until details have been confirmed and next of kin informed
- avoid prejudicing what may become a criminal prosecution
- the first consideration should always be given to the individual (reporters look for survivors and emotional issues...)

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Relating to the Media: Pressed by the Press

- Emergencies are characterised by chaos and confusion.
- Our task during a crisis is to minimise these, otherwise fear will turn into panic.
- The media, whether you like it or not, are the key channels of communication with the public.
- Newspapers, TV, radio stations, wire services, and increasingly web-based journalists will all come at you in an emergency!
Relating to the Media: Pressed by the Press

- When they are in your face, bear in mind *media relations*!
- Know the nature of the media and learn how they operate.
- Reporters are trained to be sceptical and to keep digging into a story. Consequently they can be pushy, cynical and aggressive.
- They will question everything you say and ask who is to blame. They are not called the press for nothing!
- Keep your cool. Don’t be offended -- be professional!
- … or else...

Bad Press

**BIRD FLU FEARS**

‘Govt is lying about crisis’

New in orders plans to deal with epidemic amid claims 500m chickens have died or been culled; officials to register all farms. £40 would be paid to farmers who declared they were free of disease.

*The Nation Newspaper, 16 January 2004*
Bad Press

Govt blamed for boy’s death

Mum not in mood to demand compensation

ONNUCHA HUTASINGH

Bangkok Post 11.3, 3 n. 14, 47

Victims of the information gap

The Nation

3 February 2004

Bangkok Post

3 February 2004

GROUP ACTIVITY: Simulated Press Conference

Scenario: A typhoon has hit country X (invent one!) five days ago, causing death and destruction on a wide scale.

The government has limited resources and the relief operation is hampered by infrastructural damages affecting roads, bridges, and airports.

Communications are also down in many parts of the country – landlines don’t work, neither do hand phones and forget about the internet! – consequently there is not much information available.
Lessons Learnt: Dealing with the Media

- Disasters are media events: the more catastrophic the disaster, the more press attention you will get.
- First rule of engagement: DON’T LIE! The consequence can be a disaster in itself.
- The media live on accurate and timely information.
- Give them that by sticking with what you know. Don’t speculate, give them the facts. But put these facts in context for them.
- Don’t let them speculate either. If you don’t know the relevant information that they need – find out.

Lessons Learnt: What Reporters Want

- They want answers to their questions, access to experts, and visuals to illustrate their stories...
- … only, in an emergency, they will want everything NOW.
- Anticipate their questions: Is this thing contained? How are the victims being helped? Why did this happen? Had there been warning signs? Why wasn’t it prevented? What should we do?…and finally….what aren't you telling us?
Lessons Learnt: Giving Reporters What They Want

- The more you can prepare to anticipate the needs of the media, the more you can steer them towards positive coverage...

- ...these are informing the public and helping people understand public health advices and recommendations, and gaining public acceptance for the strict measures that must be taken during the response and recovery periods.

- So prepare background information about the disease or disaster, factsheets of the basic info, things you need to know list, and put them all on your website if you have one.

Lessons Learnt: Prepare Your Team for the Media

- If you don’t already have one name a spokesperson.

- Draft talking points for responsible officials so that they do not say contradictory things and confuse the public.

- Form alliances and coordinate with relevant agencies to come up with common key messages that they could hammer home on.

- Press releases: in an emergency print information must be sent electronically or given as handouts at incident site. If it’s important put it down on paper because journalists can use it for reference.
SUMMARY - Steps in Disaster Risk Communication Planning

• Identification of risks to be addressed
• Design of risk communication strategy and plan
  ▪ Target group
  ▪ Message
  ▪ Source
  ▪ Communication channel
  ▪ How media may be involved
• Pre-testing for appropriateness of content, design and mode of communication as perceived by the target group
• Implementation
• Programme evaluation and impact assessment

Crisis and Emergency Communication

Accuracy of Information + Speed of Release = Credibility
Empathy + Openness = Trust

Successful Communication
Thank You!