



Working with the media to successfully communicate health messages to the public during an emergency

The media as partners:

Major public health emergencies will instantly engage the media. This is particularly true if they are exotic, catastrophic, or the first of their kind. For example, the appearance of a strain of flu that could potentially cause a pandemic or an explosion causing mass casualties would likely draw substantial media attention.

Health departments may find it a challenge to work with the media. However, partnership with the media is crucial. In the time of an emergency, public health agencies often rely on the media to communicate health information to the public quickly. Public health professionals need to acknowledge the media's role in a crisis and plan to meet reasonable media requirements.



Getting the facts:

The media wants quick answers to their questions and access to experts and visuals to support their coverage. This is never more true than during an emergency. Journalists use the information they collect to answer six key questions about an event: *who, when, where, what, how, and why*. The more that you can anticipate what the media wants, the more likely you are to get your message across.

It is important to understand that the media will not allow you to spoon-feed headlines to them. They will decide what to tell their viewers or readers. Do not forget that it is the media's job to present alternate perspectives on what is happening. In upholding the principle of fairness, journalists often balance one set of facts or opinions against another. For example, current government calls to prepare for pandemic influenza may be juxtaposed against the predictions of the epidemic of swine flu in 1976 that did not occur. Finally, realize that a reporter's job requires skepticism and that he or she may not take your statements at face value.

Space and time limitations:

One of the quickest ways to damage your relationship with the media is to ignore the fact that they have column space and airtime to fill and deadlines to meet. It is up to you to know their deadlines and accommodate them. Don't be afraid to ask them about a deadline if you do not know it. Attempt to give the media a reasonable expectation of when new information will be available, and establish ground rules on the schedule of releases. Provide all media outlets with the same information access at the same time.

The media outlets may have more information presented to them than there is space or time to report. This may be particularly true early in a disaster situation. Adapt to, do not fight, the limitation and make sure your primary message is delivered within the time allotted.

Tips for dealing with space and time limitations:

- Know your communication goals and supporting messages;
- Arrange them in a hierarchy of importance and develop brief (20 – 30 second) statements that explain each one;
- Practice delivering your statements in front of a mirror;
- Closely observe how others are quoted by the media. Refine your statements so that your messages can be delivered using such brief quotes.

As an event unfolds, there is often an increasing gap between what public health officials want the media to concentrate on and what the media covers. This is particularly true with stories that dominate the news over a long period of time. The media may turn to profiles of individuals involved in the story or different reactions to the story. The more you can provide the media with substantive information, the more likely the reporting will cover issues important to you.

Conclusion:

Remember the media is a partner in communicating your important health message to the public during an emergency. By understanding and respecting the media's role during an emergency, you can help form the positive relationships that are critical to your agency's communication success.

Tips for providing facts to the media:

- Make your points clearly and consistently.
- Be sure of your facts.
- Be prepared to cite sources and statistics that add meaningful support to your message.
- Have information available in fact sheets or other concise documents specifically prepared for use of the media.
- Familiarize yourself with information and opinions that are contrary to your own, and be able to answer the questions they raise.
- Be sensitive to the question's full context.
- Be patient, open and honest when taking questions.
- If there is a conflict with a reporter, keep it in perspective—do not take it personally.

Resources:

For CDC *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication* text book, go to:

http://www.orau.gov/cdcenergy/erc/content/activeinformation/resources/CERC_course_materials.htm

For *Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communication Guidelines for Public Officials* and other resources helpful to risk communication relative to pandemic flu, visit the CDC website <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/rcommunication/>



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Mission: As part of a national network of Centers for Public Health Preparedness that are funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Yale Center for Public Health Preparedness, based at the Yale School of Public Health, works to ensure that frontline public health workers are prepared to respond to public health emergencies including natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and disease outbreaks.

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