



Risk Communication: An Integral Element in Public Health Emergencies

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DEAR EDITOR,

Over the years, multiple number of health emergencies (such as disease-outbreaks – H1N1 or Ebola disease, chemical accidents, radiation leaks, natural disasters, conflicts, wars, etc.), have been reported worldwide, which have claimed the lives of thousands of people.^[1,2] However, in most of the instances the mental sufferings can be avoided, or lives of susceptible people can be saved, provided the local population had access to fast, effective and transparent communication.^[1-3] In fact, realizing the scope of risk communication in preventing disease, disability, and even mortality, it has been considered as one of the eight integral functions, which the World Health Organization (WHO) member states must develop to effectively respond to both public health emergencies and humanitarian crises.^[4]

In general, risk communication refers to the real-time exchange of information, advice and opinions between experts and masses exposed to the threat, which can compromise their survival, health, economic or social well-being.^[4] The primary objective of effective risk communication is to enable people at risk to take well-informed decisions not only to protect themselves, but even their loved ones from the emergency by taking appropriate and timely protective and preventive actions.^[4] However, the success of risk communication is eventually dependant on thorough understanding of people's (in terms of their knowledge, practices, perceptions, concerns, beliefs, etc.); experts attributes (such as their credibility, caring and empathic nature, level of trust between experts and affected persons, etc.); and ability of the communicator to promptly detect the prevalent rumors/myths/misconceptions and address them before it starts interfering with the preventive and control measures.^[4,5]

Risk communication has been acknowledged as one of the lifesaving intervention, especially in public health emergencies.^[1-3] This is so because people do have a right to know how to protect themselves and their relatives' health by understanding and adopting protective behaviors by taking well-informed decisions.^[2-4] Furthermore, the communication at times of emergencies has even benefited other stakeholders like local program managers (in assessing health impact of the emergencies and providing them evidence to develop an effective health response), donors and concerned public across the globe.^[4] In addition, at times of emergencies, effective risk communication can empower nations/local communities to preserve their socioeconomic and political stability, and even prevent the loss of trust of people on public health authorities by enabling health officials to address people's concerns and needs so that relevant and acceptable advice can be communicated to the masses.^[4,5]

A wide range of communication techniques (viz., mass media, social networking, etc.) have been adopted to facilitate risk communication.^[2,5] However, a wide range of challenges such as globalization; extensive international trade and travel; a complex animal-human interface; rise in threat of bioterrorism; enormous popularity of the social networking sites (because of which the reliance on health experts/authorities has seriously decreased, and at the same time it even encourages spread of rumors and incorrect information); and changes in the field of journalism (like 24-h journalism where most of the news consists of opinions rather than facts) and approach of journalists, have been identified which have seriously questioned the effectiveness of risk communication.^[4,5]

In the modern world, the need of the hour is to strengthen the existing risk communication capacity so that the

existing challenges and the health emergencies can be tackled better.^[4] The primary strategy is to implement the WHO guidelines released to cover different aspects of risk communication.^[4,5] This includes components such as establishing a comprehensive policy and plans for risk communication; ensuring training of the health professionals/local officials so that they can acquire appropriate skills and be competent; conducting training sessions for journalists on how to report on health emergencies; devising a mechanism to discourage people to advertise incomplete or wrong information on social networking websites; and running simulation exercises to assess the extent of preparedness of nations.^[4,6] In addition, the approach to constitute an Emergency Communications Network (ECN) system with an aim to identify, train, assess and deploy risk communication experts also deserves immense significance, so that the members (who have the ability to work in coordination with national and local authorities) of the network can be deployed at times of emergencies.^[7] In fact, since the constitution of ECN, the members have been deployed in disease outbreak settings, humanitarian emergencies and in natural disasters.^[7]

To conclude, risk communication is an integral element of any public health emergency response and thus all efforts should be taken by the nations to strengthen the same, so that lives of numerous people can be saved at times of emergencies.

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