Public Communication Strategies to Remedy Panic in a Pandemic

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Overview

- ‘Information Age’ Poses Both Opportunities and Obstacles for Mobilizing the Public’s Response During a Health Crisis
- Concept of ‘Governance Dilemmas’ Lays Bare the Larger Moral, Social, and Political Contexts for ‘Risk/Crisis Communications’
- Recommended Resources
Outbreaks in the Information Age – Lessons from Anthrax 2001

- Problem: Communication w/ public during evolving, uncertain, and threatening event
- Nat’l, qualitative study: 23 moderated discussions convened across 6 cities
- 3 priority subject groups: responders; grassroots leaders; “at risk” workers
- Debriefing on anthrax plus speculations as to smallpox’s special requirements
- Write-up underway for publication
Epidemic’s Broad Impact in Info-Saturated Environment

“I was on vacation in Mexico when all of this happened, and everybody was glued to the television set watching CNN in the bar at the resort…And they finally made a decision to turn off the TV…so people could enjoy their vacation.”

- Seniors’ Advocate, Seattle, WA
Emergency Signal Lost in All the Noise

“I remember feeling…like [the] media was in stream of consciousness mode and everything was without context…. Everything was just dumped on you, and you’re just trying to process it. What do you do with all this information?”

- Refugee Advocate, Seattle, WA
Beyond Mainstream Media and High Tech Fixes

“…[I]n my community, I don’t believe much in papers. I strongly believe in, ‘Look, let’s go to that place, tonight, a meeting,’ and we can gather 500 without any problem.”

- Latino Community Organizer, NYC
High-Volume Demands for Health Info Misdiagnosed as ‘Panic’

“What do you mean by ‘panic’? Can you give a concrete example of it?”
- Facilitator

“All those calls into the health department.”
- Responder

(Paraphrased from several locales)
Shifting from ‘Communications’ to ‘Governance Dilemmas’

• Limits to approaching public engagement strictly in terms of ‘communications’
• Anticipate and avert governing “trouble spots”
  – Tensions among high-order objectives of outbreak control
  – Splintering of social trust between leaders and public, and throughout the community
• Working Group includes seasoned political and public health leaders
• Biosecurity & Bioterrorism 2004;2(1):25-40
Analytic Tools to Aid Leaders’ Conscious Pursuit of Collaboration with Public during Health Crises

• Strategic Goals of Epidemic Control
• Illustrated Guide to Societal and Biological Complexities of Epidemics
• Recurrent ‘Governing Dilemmas’ that Arise in Large Outbreaks
  – Tensions among Strategic Goals
  – Splintering of Social Trust
Stop Communicable Disease and Uphold Individual Freedoms

• Make bioterrorism plans public before crisis occurs; well-informed population more likely to follow advice.
• Sketch out the “big picture”; make concrete the fact that personal actions can affect the safety of others.
• Provide goods and services that help people comply with health orders.
• Use disease controls that respect autonomy and self-determination: Public cooperation limits illness and death; resistance does not.
• Restrict civil liberties, if necessary, only in a transparent and equitable way.
Smallpox in Milwaukee, 1894

Leslie’s Weekly Illustrated Newspaper
Smallpox in NYC, 1947
Conclusion: Public Engagement in Preparedness and Response Requires Tools to Help Refine Leadership Skills and to Build Realistic Operational Systems