Averting the Tipping Point
Risk Communications for Swine Flu and Other Healthcare Emergencies

EMForum.org

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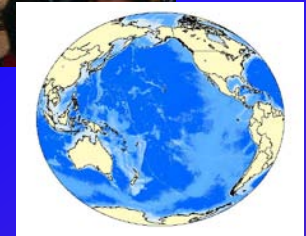**Risk Communications Consultant**

The Frew Group

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If a disaster risk to the community exists, the community deserves to be informed.

Context

- New health risk challenges
- Community shifts
- Globalization
- More response integration
- Expanded communication methods

Personal Context

- Involved with disaster risk communications for the last two decades

- Work with state and local public health providers in CA

- First experience during Avian Flu outbreak while teaching on site in Asia

Snapshot: H1N1 Swine Influenza

US statistics: (Sunday)

- 2,532 confirmed cases

- 44 states

- 3 deaths

- 104 people in the hospital (Saturday)

International mortality statistics:

- 48 deaths in Mexico

- 1 death in Canada

- 1 in Costa Rica

Snapshot: H1N1 Swine Influenza

Shifts

Although most cases appear to be mild, just as in seasonal flu, the swine flu strain has killed.

Generally, situation has calmed down, with more normal situations, except there are sanitary filters in academic, work and other environments.

Major Concerns

H1N1 has moved into the southern hemisphere, where influenza season is just beginning.

Virus could mix with circulating seasonal flu viruses or the H5N1 avian influenza virus to create new strains

Our Communication Challenge

to communicate *across cultures* and *world views* to help people understand and reduce risk, respond to & recover from emergency event

Examples of Health Risk Concerns

- Hazards of concern?
- Probability of exposure?
- Distribution of exposure?
- Probability of types of harm?
- Sensitivities of different populations?
- Interaction with exposures to other hazards?
- Characteristic of hazards?
- Total population at risk?

Addressing Concerns

- Communication goes beyond technical information and scientific data to address the emotional component

- Data is not always complete

- Reassurance factors reduce fear

- Scare and anger factors increase fear

Issues of Interest

- Consequences of worst-case/alternative
- Scenarios and emergency/disaster likelihood
- Safety ("threshold") limits
- Perceived risks reported by the media
    - *What is real? How do I clarify or correct?*
- Community emergency response actions
- Trustworthy information sources

Creating Effective Risk Communications Outreach
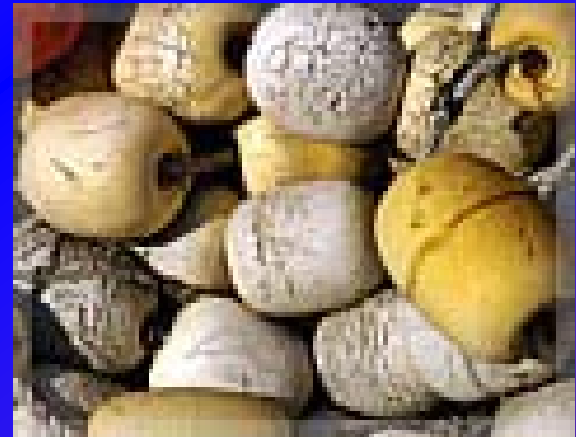
Five Critical Steps

Hear

Understand

Believe

Personalize

Act

Priority Audience: High Risk/Vulnerable Populations

- Immigrant/limited English speaking
- Young/elderly
- Disabled
- Low income
- Single parent households
- Medically fragile
- Animals
- Populations located in high risk zones

Communication Priorities

- Use a systems approach—public and private sectors
- Inform and engage stakeholders
- Seek useful input and feedback
- Be consistent in messaging
- Provide prompt critical information
- Use multiple sources and outreach channels (social media, traditional media, official statements, social networks)
- Retain credibility and trust

Community Stakeholders
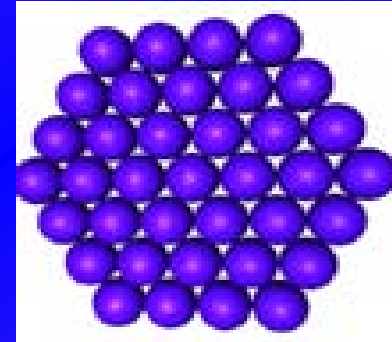
- Community Members
- Government
- Traditional/Non-traditional Media
- Community & Faith-Based Organizations
- Business and Industry
- Associations (PTA)
- Social and Civic Clubs

H1N1 Risk Communications Outreach

- http://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/
- WHO Pandemic Levels (in graph chart)http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/phase/en/
- State/County Health Department Websites
- Private Sector/CBO – Business Executives for National Security (BENS)
- List serves

Sample Message Content

- Disease
- Prevention
- Treatment
- Control
- Emergency actions
- Impact
- Follow up actions

Did we avoid the tipping point or was it hype?

"The survival of mankind will depend upon people who think differently to act together."

Geert Hofstede
cross-cultural theorist

Contact Information

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