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**Why Effective Communication is Important
In Management of Public Health Emergencies – A Viewpoint**



Why Effective Communication is Important in Management of Public Health Emergencies – A Viewpoint

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to present a reflective viewpoint of what entails effective communication and why it is important in a public health setting when dealing with emergencies.

Methodology: The article uses the COVID 19 pandemic as a template to illustrate how effective communication is needed to address a public health emergency effectively.

Findings: Centralized and non-conflicting communication is integral in ensuring effective management of a public health emergency. Effective management requires consistent, centralized, and simple to understand and implement communication.

Unique Contribution to Theory Practice and Policy: Public Health Emergencies are national emergencies and require collaboration of multiple agencies and stakeholders to effectively address and control the situation. This process must ensure that the public who are the primary stakeholder receive the maximal benefits from any intervention to safeguard their health and safety while guaranteeing economic and social stability.

Keywords

Effective Communication, Public Health, Emergencies



Introduction

We have had great success in the [last] five years in controlling outbreaks, but we have only recently come to understand that communications are as critical to outbreak control as laboratory analyses or epidemiology (Dr Jong-wook Lee, Director-General, WHO, 21 September 2004)

It is a reality that until an exotic communicable disease that threatens the world emerges, the efforts of our public health services go unnoticed and are even ignored as lacking interest and importance. However, during a public health pandemic, like the recent COVID 19 outbreak that ravaged the world only recently, the need and demand for reliable information escalates rapidly. This information must be provided by the relevant authority in a manner that is non-threatening and easily understood to allay panic that is stoked by the unknown and other fear-mongering sources. Often, the latter can outstrip the former resulting in panic and threat to socio economic stability (1).

Effective communication can rally support, calm a nervous public, provide much needed information, encourage cooperative behaviors, and help save lives. Poor communication can fan emotions, disrupt economies, and undermine confidence (1). Effective communication involves the presentation of facts and views in a timely and unambiguous manner in a medium that is easily understood by an audience. It must be clear, accurate, dependable, specific, understandable, concise, and must meet the intended requirements (2).

When this is done it will allow timely dissemination of information to facilitate stakeholder involvement in implementing strategies with clear goals and outcomes that can be measured. This will create confidence in the organization and will ensure complete buy-in to ensure the aims of the initiative are achieved. Communication must also be transparent to ensure a level playing field and respect for all stakeholders.

Effective communication is hampered when the language used is inappropriate and ambiguous, with irrelevant and conflicting information which adds to “noise” and loss of the essence of the message. This will result in resistance to the information which may be due to education mismatch, social inequities, and demographic differences with a negative impact on outcomes.

The Pandemic

Nowhere are these more important than in public messaging during an emergency, the COVID 19 pandemic that disrupted all spheres of activity between 2020 and 2022 being a good example. During the pandemic, all spheres of activity were affected by a health emergency that had wide repercussions in terms of health with significant morbidity and mortality. The surge in numbers who fell ill created a major strain for the healthcare system. This was due to the substantial numbers with COVID as well others with chronic illnesses which were exacerbated or relapsed due to disruptions in their care. The ensuing lockdown had an impact on mental wellness as well, after the initial euphoria of being able to stay home wore off. The extension of the initial period of

lockdown then impacted job and financial security which impacted socio economic wellbeing. This brought the impact to full circle as socio economic status correlates directly with health and wellbeing. With the arrival of a vaccine, uptake was hampered not only due to availability issues but also due to disinformation and misinformation regarding vaccine safety and effectiveness, which continues till date due to the pervasiveness of fake news and the social media which outstripped and continues to outstrip robust scientific data in terms of dissemination.

It was at this time that effective communication was required to address and allay concerns of the lay public regarding the emergency while building confidence in the service provided by hospitals and health care centers both in the public and private sector. This information had to have a reliable source with expert opinion delivered in simple precise and understandable language (3) with minimal need for repeated clarification which would cause a slowdown in provision of care, thus impacting outcomes.

Information would also need to be communicated in an appropriate manner using all channels available including social, broadcast, and print media to ensure as extensive a reach as possible, leaving no one behind (3). It was only with effective communication that planning, and provision of service could continue unabated, any disruption would have led to a breakdown of services and panic among the public.

This is the primary reason behind the UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction which recommends people centered communication that addresses the immediate needs and allows planning to manage disasters on an emergency footing (3). Another aspect of effective communication in a public health emergency is risk communication, which involves real time exchange of information, advice and opinions between experts and people who face a health hazard. This allows provision of effective interventions in real time to address issues that need attention urgently to prevent further exacerbation of the situation (3).

The Malaysian Experience

The management of the pandemic in the Malaysian context is a good example of how effective communication worked in curbing the pandemic. This was achieved by a coordinating all activity via the National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA) with the Ministry of Health deploying its resources and providing professional, technical advice and recommendations to facilitate decision making at a national level. (4)

Among the strategies were centralized management of the pandemic with appropriate guidelines and standard operating procedures that were regularly updated with daily briefings by the Ministry of Health on daily admissions, discharges, intensive care bed and ventilator utilization as well as mortality. In tandem with this were briefings by the National Safety Council outlining government policy in managing the situation. (4) Involvement of NGOs and think tanks to provide support via effective utilization of information sharing platforms also played a part in ensuring the best and

most reliable information was always available easily. This was particularly important to educate the lay public on virus spread and recognition of symptoms to allow the lay public to recognize disease progression, indicating the need for specialized hospital care. Effective communication also served to educate the public on interventions that were effective and those that were not as well as information re vaccine rollout. This in particular was fraught with hurdles because of the incessant deluge of contradictory information regarding availability, effectiveness, and safety of each vaccine

This last strategy was important as it ensured that at least 84% of the eligible population received at least two vaccinations and 50% received the first booster (5) in Malaysia. This was undeniably important in controlling the pandemic. The enthusiasm for the second booster has waned though with rates of about 2.5%, (5) probably because the numbers with the infection dropped with a concomitant drop in severe disease, morbidity, and mortality.

In summary effective communication that is contextual, accurate, and transparent, addressing difficult issues is paramount in management of a public health emergency. This communication needs to be top down in terms of strategy but needs to consider community perspectives to effectively understand and manage the situation on the ground, entailing a two-way hybrid platform for shared decision making and implementation of strategy involving identified members of the public to disseminate such information. (6)

Forward thinking and decisive leadership which manages challenges posed by disruptions in the work force while ensuring continuance of healthcare and other essential services is paramount, as is harnessing the digital sphere for effective management of data and timely dissemination of information, so that care is provided where it is needed in a timely manner without disruption.

All this in tandem with effective communication at the center will ensure effective confrontation and management of public health emergencies.

Conclusion

The European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) summarized the importance of communication succinctly when they called for ethical and effective communications to manage the COVID 19 pandemic in 4 statements emphasizing the need for consistent, expert, trusted, and public oriented communication to save lives (7). This must be the core of all our strategies to combat any public health emergency in the near or distant future.

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