

**MIDDLE EAST SUB-REGIONAL RISK COMMUNICATION WORKSHOP**  
**MAY 17-18, 2006**  
**Report**

The Middle East Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance (MECIDS) convened a workshop on risk communication for avian and pandemic influenza at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem on May 17-18, 2006. Facilitated by the press and media relations officer of the World Health Organization European Regional Office and the director of immunization information of the United Kingdom Ministry of Health, the workshop included members of the Israeli and Jordanian National Influenza Preparedness Committees and a Palestinian infectious disease expert from Al-Quds University. The purpose of the meeting was to help participants improve their strategies for communicating with the public regarding actual and potential avian and pandemic flu outbreaks and to harmonize the messages that Palestinian, Jordanian, and Israeli governments present to their publics about such outbreaks.

**WHO Experience:**

The WHO media relations officer said that SARS and avian influenza alerted health leaders around the world to the need to upgrade communication skills. Member states asked the WHO for assistance on this aspect of outbreak control. As a result, the WHO created a global network on risk communication, which has identified key elements of effective communication and is in the process of developing messages specific to avian and pandemic influenza.

**Jordanian Experience:**

Jordan's risk communication plan is unique in that members of the media are included in its risk communication committee. Officials produced pamphlets aimed at mothers and families explaining avian influenza and suggesting simple control measures like hand-washing. Among the challenges they faced were a delay in developing a risk communication strategy (because priority was placed first on the operational response to the disease, and only secondly on communication) and the absence of a single organization that could coordinate messages.

**Israeli Experience:**

Israeli agricultural and health ministries coordinated their public diplomacy efforts from the very start of the outbreak. People involved in the operational aspects of handling the avian flu and containing it, were briefed in advance on the key messages, trained for public appearances and worked in harmony, complementing each other's area of responsibility.

Instruction elements for poultry breeders were prepared in advance (video, leaflet) and a campaign was launched during the outbreak to lessen levels of anxiety and ensure that consumption of poultry and eggs was not affected.

Ads assuring the public that chicken was safe for eating were published and simple instructions (not technical) on how to cook chicken and boil eggs were given by doctors. Following recent cases of avian influenza, Israeli agriculture and health officials found that most of the concerns that they heard from the general public involved the safety of

eggs. They found that consumption of eggs reduced by 5 percent during the outbreak, and consumption of chicken reduced by 10 percent. It is now back to normal. Other participants agreed that such statistics are a useful measure of the effectiveness of communications measures about food and suggested that the three nations conduct similar research together in the future.

**UK Experience:** The UK has developed an extensive suite of material about pandemic influenza and a phased program for delivering it in different media. It can be seen at <http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en>. The materials are being developed based on extensive research, particularly focus groups that test the effectiveness of different messages. For example, the graphic design of the information pamphlets was changed to emphasize the word “pandemic,” in order to alert the reader that the subject under discussion is not just regular seasonal flu. Officials also are putting emphasis on reaching all sectors of the population, including those with little or no English language skills.

### **Challenges, Strategies, and Lessons Learned:**

From their combined experiences, the participants developed a list of challenges to effective risk communication, coping strategies, and lessons learned that they call can apply.

#### *Challenges:*

- Worst case scenario?
  - Balance reassurance and alarm
- Dealing with uncertainty
  - Different countries handle rumors differently
- Show diversity of opinion
  - Within UN system
  - Within countries
- Confusion between avian and pandemic flu
- Technical level of messages
- Coping with emotional reactions
  - Neutral, scientific tone may not be what’s needed
- Media relations
  - How much does the public really want to know?
- For pandemic, how do we plan for the unknown
- Coordination among agencies
- The media get the story wrong
- Delay in focusing on risk communication
- No budget
- “Building the ship as we sail it”
- Confusion between avian and human problems

#### *Strategies:*

- Bring risk communication people into the room with technical people

- Add simple, behavioral messages to technical messages
- Go to the street; adapt messages to community needs
- Engage private sector for budget and for developing and disseminating messages
- Establish multisectoral committee
- Prepare “bank” of experts and give training on how to deal with media
- Convene or reach out to journalists
- Establish call center for the public

#### *Lessons Learned:*

- Release information in a gradual manner (in stages).
  - Don’t give operational information too early.
  - Don’t give information that is too technical, lengthy, or complicated.
- Give information proportional to the risk (not too alarmist, not too reassuring)
- Don’t patronize us. If people are going to die, we don’t want to know, but we *need to know*.
- Coordination among different agencies in a single country (or within UN system) is essential—but must be balanced with the need for information to be released quickly.
- Respect the people, be open with them, be transparent, listen and learn from them, share ideas and knowledge, support them. Test ourselves.
  - Test messages.
  - Go out to the street.
- Work with your partners in your country
  - Professional organizations
  - Academia
  - NGOs, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations

#### **Harmonizing Messages:**

Following the recommendations of the UK and the experience of the WHO and UNICEF in developing avian influenza messages, participants agreed that they should all present the same strategic messages but should adapt their method of presentation to local needs. Strategic messages might include, “Pandemic influenza is likely to occur.” “If it does, many people will get sick, and some will die.” *None of the participants has completed development of messages regarding pandemic influenza. They agreed to share them as they develop them.*

#### **Common Plan of Action:**

Participants discussed the procedures through which they would coordinate during an outbreak. These procedures constitute a common plan of action on risk communication. Organized as follows, they can be added to a common plan of action for disease control measures developed by another, similar working group.

*Event: WHO Pandemic Phase 3 (current situation)*

Action at the regional level:

- Share messages to ensure consistency.

*Event: WHO Declares Pandemic Phase 4*

Action at the national level:

- Convene press conference, with professionals giving information (as opposed to political leaders of Ministry of Health)
- Release Phase 4 messages
  - Global nature of problem
  - Government is working on the problem
  - Etc.
- Establish public hotline

Action at the regional level:

- A meeting will be convened at the earliest convenience between health communication officials
- WHO will ensure flow of information through its country representatives.
- Consult with each other in order to ensure consistency.

*Event: WHO Declares Pandemic Phase 5*

Action at the regional level:

- A meeting will be convened at the earliest convenience between health communication officials
- WHO will ensure flow of information through its country representatives.
- Consult with each other in order to ensure consistency.
- WHO will provide credible and transparent information.

*Event: WHO Declares Pandemic Phase 6*

If cases are in neighboring country:

- Special messages: (Depends on operational recommendations.)
- Communications professionals should coordinate in order to ensure consistency.

**Next Steps:**

Participants agreed on the following next steps:

- Share documents and minutes from this meeting: May 25
- Update national committees on outcomes of this meeting: Within the next month.
- Share existing products: June 5
- Update each other on work in progress: June 25
- WHO Outbreak Communication Group meets: Early September
- Share future products: September 30