

# Outbreak Communication

**Source for the  
material: WHO**

**Last updated: 28 February 2009**



**World Health  
Organization**

**ATTENTION..WE INTERRUPT  
THIS EMERGENCY BREAKING  
NEWS BULLETIN WITH AN  
EVEN SCARIER EMERGENCY  
BREAKING NEWS BULLETIN..**

*MIKE  
PETERS*



# SARS

---

A WHO spokesman said today: "People are not responding to antibiotics or antivirals. It's a highly contagious disease and it's moving around by jet. Until we can get a grip on it, I don't see how it will slow down. It's bad."

**-- Associated Press (March 17, 2003)**

# Outbreaks: Unique Public Health Events

---

- **Unfolding** events and true impact may not be known for weeks or months, which leads to speculation and great uncertainty

# Outbreaks: Unique Public Health Events

---

- **Unfolding** events and true impact may not be known for weeks or months, which leads to speculation and great uncertainty
- **Behavior** plays a key role in transmission

# Outbreaks: Unique Public Health Events

---

- **Unfolding** events and true impact may not be known for weeks or months, which leads to speculation and great uncertainty
- **Behavior** plays a key role in transmission
- **Unpredictable**, decisions often demanded even while reliable information is limited

# Outbreaks: Unique Public Health Events

---

- **Unfolding** events and true impact may not be known for weeks or months, which leads to speculation and great uncertainty
- **Behavior** plays a key role in transmission
- **Unpredictable**, decisions often demanded even while reliable information is limited
- Socially and economically disruptive, therefore have **strong political dimensions**

# Outbreaks: Unique Public Health Events

---

- **Unfolding** events and true impact may not be known for weeks or months, which leads to speculation and great uncertainty
- **Behavior** plays a key role in transmission
- **Unpredictable**, decisions often demanded even while reliable information is limited
- Socially and economically disruptive, therefore have **strong political dimensions**
- Create **anxiety** in the public, and often in response managers and other decision makers

# Outbreaks: Unique Public Health Events

---

- **Unfolding** events and true impact may not be known for weeks or months, which leads to speculation and great uncertainty
- **Behavior** plays a key role in transmission
- **Unpredictable**, decisions often demanded even while reliable information is limited
- Socially and economically disruptive, therefore have **strong political dimensions**
- Create **anxiety** in the public, and often in response managers and other decision makers
- Thus eminently **newsworthy**

# Developing Outbreak Communication

---

"(T)here has not necessarily been a convergence between scholarly literature, official guide(line)s and actual practices within policy institutions."

BSE Four Country Study (WHO, November 2004)

# Trust

---

"The over-arching communication goal during an outbreak is to communicate with the public in ways that build, maintain or restore trust."

WHO Outbreak Communication Guidelines

# Components of Trust

---

The public perception of your

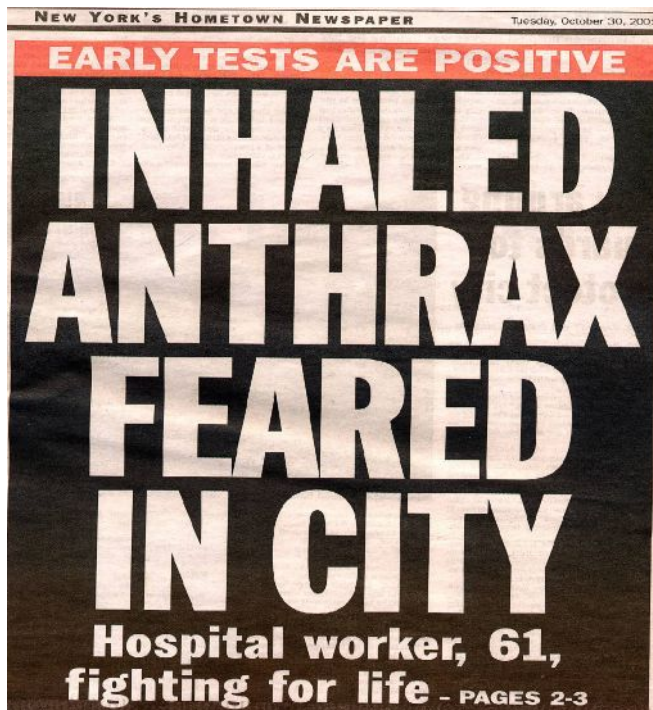
**Motives**

**Transparency**

**Competence**

# First Announcement

The most critical of all outbreak communication messages



## Secrets and lies in Europe

Mad cow disease is perceived as a British problem. But there are signs that the infection has spread silently across the Continent and may now be about to erupt

Deborah MacKenzie, Brussels

BEFORE 1996, supermarkets in Brussels that sold British beef would proudly advertise the fact on large signs over their meat counters. Since the scare over mad cow disease put an end to British beef exports, the signs have promoted Belgian beef as a safe alternative—pure and trustworthy, and free from bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

But there is growing evidence that shoppers in Brussels, and all over Europe, are

1989, virtually all caused by infected British feed. Belgium, Austria, Luxembourg, Sweden, Finland and Spain have reported none. Denmark says it has had one case, Italy two and Germany five, though all in cattle imported from Britain. This contrasts oddly with France's 27 cases, all of which were indigenous and all of which were linked to infected British MBM. The Dutch reported their first two cases this spring, apparently also caused by infected British feed.

Britain, says Marc Savey, head of animal health research at the French National Centre for Veterinary Studies in Lyon. A French parliamentary inquiry into BSE published in January claims that up to 16 000 tonnes of British MBM were imported every year by France alone before Paris banned it in 1989. Other EU countries imported British MBM until 1994. Accurate trade figures are impossible to obtain, says Savey, "but we know there is a massive trade in MBM among all European countries. Just the fact that Switzerland has lots of cases caused by British MBM shows there must be others." Yet France, and now the Netherlands, are the only countries reporting such cases.

Savey says that many EU countries, with

# First Announcement

---

- The most critical of all outbreak communication messages
- Must be early
- Likely to be wrong

# Transparency

---

- Ways to improve transparency
  - Aim for total openness
  - Keep detailed records of decision-making meetings
  - Promise and deliver regular briefings
  - Messages easily understood

# Transparency

---

- Barriers to Transparency:
  - Weak surveillance can impact accuracy.
  - Real or perceived competing interest (economic vs. public health)
  - Spokespersons or public health officials who are uncomfortable with delivering bad news, or who over-reassure.
  - Communication decision-makers may fear the media will misrepresent bad or uncertain news
  - Concern the public can't tolerate uncertainty or will panic

# Dialogue with the public

---

- Early risk communication
- Understanding public before opinions
- Including the public
- Dialogue with the public

# Planning

---

Need endorsement of senior management and political leaders on:

- first announcements
- limits of transparency
- who will be the spokesperson
- have a risk communications plan

# Message Making

---

- Don't over-reassure
- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Share dilemmas (AI's "unknowns")
- Don't over-plan for panic
- Tolerate early over-reactions
- Don't lie or tell half-truths
  - Peter Sandman, "Recommendations for Crisis Communications"

# The Hardest Part

---

- Doing things that are counterintuitive
- Adjustment reaction
- Trust the public
- Alternative?
- WHO can help