



The Risk Communiqué

Winter 2008

Welcome to this edition of *The Risk Communiqué*, a quarterly newsletter devoted to sharing insights about risk communication policies, philosophies, and practices. If you received this issue, you probably bought a copy of *Risk Communication: A Handbook for Communicating Environmental, Safety, and Health Risks* or met the primary author at a conference, training session, or consultation. This newsletter is being provided to help you communicate complex scientific and technical information.

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FDA Selects Members for Risk Communication Advisory Committee

On November 5, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced the names of the 15 voting members of its new Risk Communication Advisory Committee. The purpose of the committee is to help the FDA better understand public communication needs and issues, develop strategic plans on communicating risks and benefits of products regulated by the FDA, and recommend, based on current research, how best to communicate specific product information to "vulnerable audiences."

Since the FDA announced the creation of the committee in June 2007, the agency received over 240 nominations. The FDA selected both independent subject matter experts and members of the public. Fields represented include risk communication, risk perception, decision analysis, social marketing, health literacy, journalism, and other behavioral and social sciences. Perhaps most interesting for risk communicators is the fact that risk communication legend Baruch Fischhoff from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburg is the chair.

Many other members are academicians. The full list of members can be found at <http://www.fda.gov/oc/advisory/OCRCACRoster.htm>.

"Communicating effectively about the safety and effectiveness of drugs and other medical products is one of the central roles of the FDA," said Randall Lutter, Ph.D., Deputy Commissioner for Policy in the agency's press release about the committee membership. "We were in such strong agreement about the value of the Risk Communication Advisory Committee that we expanded its scope to address communication regarding all products regulated by the agency, including our food supply responsibilities."

Members will serve terms ranging from 1 to 4 years. They face an uphill battle. Public opinion as evidenced in a number of health and medical blogs has been clearly skeptical of the committee's ability to remain neutral. Regardless, the committee's recommendations should provide insight for other risk communication efforts. Tentative meeting dates are February 28 and 29, May 15 and 16, August 21 and 22, and November 17 and 18 in Washington, D.C.

Consistent Messages Change Media's Portrayal of Risk

You've heard the story: suicides often increase around the holidays, making all those bright lights one of the darkest times of the year. Nothing could be farther from the truth, according to Dan Romer, Ph.D., of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania. Romer and his colleagues have been studying the media's transmission of this myth for 7 years, an interesting look at risk communication in action. Because of their persistence, the results of their work may have led to the news media doing an about face.

According to studies of hospital reports on self-inflicted injuries and suicides, the suicide rate in the U.S. is actually the lowest in December and peaks in the spring and fall. The Annenberg Center has been trying to educate the media about this fact. On November 19, the center issued its seventh press release about its analysis of newspaper reporting. According to Romer's studies, only 9% of articles written in the 2006 holiday season perpetuated the myth, a statistically significant drop from 2005, which saw over 50% of stories in support.

"Although it has taken 7 years to see a significant drop in reporting, the message may have finally registered with the many reporters who describe people's challenges during the holiday season," said Romer in the center's press release. "We hope the same pattern holds this year."

It very well may. After the center issued its press release, stories appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*, and *Jackson Hole Star-Tribune*, among others, all debunking the myth and quoting the center.

The center hopes to educate the public about the most likely source of suicide risk, mental illness, and encourage the press to support those suffering from major depression and other treatable mental conditions in seeking help.

For the full story, head over to the Annenberg Center at <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/NewsFilter.aspx?mySubType=finding&> and click on the link for the 11/19 story.

Businesses Advised to Prepare Now for Pandemic

The American Society of Safety Engineers hosted a webinar in December on the need to prepare for a pandemic, with Scott Mugno, Federal Express' Managing Director for Corporate Safety, Health, and Fire Protection as the key speaker. Mugno urged businesses to stay informed and prepare now, citing the potential devastation of a pandemic in terms of economic and human impact. For example, the Trust for America's Health estimates a pandemic could kill over half a million Americans, hospitalize more than 2 million, and cost our economy between \$70 and \$160 billion in lost productivity and direct medical expenses.

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If you need more assistance in risk communication, public involvement, or science and health communication, or need to train staff in these areas, please contact Regina Lundgren at lundgren@owt.com or 509-582-6995. For more information about risk communication, see <http://www.riskcom.com>.

Businesses Advised to Prepare for Pandemic

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In the risk communication arena, Mugno advised businesses to train a media point of contact for pandemics and develop an emergency chain of command. This chain of command could be critical in reviewing and approving information to be released.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have developed a planning checklist to help businesses prepare. You can find it online at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/businesschecklist.html>.

Welcome to the Blogosphere!

Last issue shared how organizations are using web blogs (online journals) to help communicate risk information. Now it's official – according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, many Americans are getting their news and health care information from the Internet. Most frequented are blogs or social marketing sites like MySpace. Need proof? Fox News, for example, regularly includes information obtained from blogs in its reporting. Some of the presidential debates have included questions provided via YouTube, a popular online video sharing site. Recently a blog written by senior public health practitioners criticized the World Health Organization's (WHO's) response to pandemic influenza, and a WHO official posted a comment in reply, explaining the organization's stance on the issue (see http://scienceblogs.com/effectmeasure/2008/01/blogs_bad_reporting_and_who.php).

That's power.

How can you harness that power in your risk communication campaign?

- Start by determining your organization's policy for posting online. Is there an "official" commenter for your organization? Does anyone have to review or approve the comment before it is posted? Can employees post using their titles and organizational affiliation?
- Determine where the risk you're interested in is being discussed online. An easy way to do this is by using the Google Alerts feature to track key phrases as they appear across the Internet.
- Contact those blogs and sites that seem to offer appropriate information and have a number of followers. You can generally tell the popularity of a blog by how many comments each post receives, but don't forget the many silent readers out there. Look also for blogs that are repeated or quoted to determine how often they are being read. Post comments or offer to provide content for future posts.

Think of influential bloggers as your voice to your stakeholders, and cultivate relationships the same way you would with any other member of the press. You might start by checking out Science Blogs at <http://www.scienceblogs.com/>.

Just for Fun, or More?

And speaking of using the power of the Internet to communicate risks, an enterprising gentleman has produced a hilarious training video on risks for nuclear workers and shared them via YouTube. The production values may be low and the song lyrics corny, but the messages come across just the same: time, distance, shielding, and good procedures can prevent worker exposure. Watch at your own risk at

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=pSWyk0t0zgk>.

Websites of Interest

Risk Communication Biography

<http://cancercontrol.cancer.gov/D ECC/riskcommbib/>

This incredible database from the National Cancer Institute contains over 850 references to published documents addressing risk communication of public health issues. It was last updated in June 2006.

Literature Review on Risk Communication

<http://www.communicate-cooperative.eu>

This project sought to develop an online training course for scientists and journalists on how to communicate risk information. The literature review is a great offshoot

and includes articles, studies, reports, and links related to risk communication information.

The Best of the Publicity Hound, 2007

http://www.publicityhound.com/fre_e_publicity/Bestof2007.html

Internationally known publicity consultant Joan Stewart, aka the Publicity Hound, issues an annual list of her most popular publicity tips published in her free weekly newsletter. Evaluate her tips before using, however, as some don't necessarily work well in a risk communication environment. But if you're struggling to gain awareness of your risk, she has some great pointers for reaching audiences.

Dubious Data Awards

<http://www.consumeraffairs.com/news04/2008/01/stats.html>

The Statistical Assessment Service (STATS), affiliated with George Mason University in Virginia, issues a yearly count down of the most egregious uses of data to justify scaring the public into taking action over questionable risks. STATS hopes the awards will help correct scientific misinformation in the media. See if the risks you manage hit their top ten.

The Risk Communiqué is a quarterly newsletter providing insights into the policies, philosophies, and practices of risk communication (© 2008 Regina Lundgren). For more information, or to subscribe or unsubscribe, contact lundgren@owt.com. Permission is granted to copy, transmit, and/or cite information in this newsletter as long as the copyright notice © and source are given.