



The Risk Communiqué

Spring 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.

Inside

More Frequent
Communication Lowers
Heart Disease Risk - 2

Encouraging At-Risk
Populations to Act - 2

Making the Most of
Advisory Boards - 3

Extra! Extra! IEEE to
Publish Fourth Edition! - 4

Websites of Interest - 4

Risk Communication Helps Reduce Worker Risks

Working at heights remains one of the most common causes of work-related deaths in Great Britain. Now, 3 years after the country enacted Work at Height Regulations, fatalities are decreasing. Part of that decrease has been attributed to control measures, but risk communication is also sharing the credit.

Research attests to risk communication making a difference. In the summer of 2007, as part of earning her masters in health and safety management from Leicester University, Debbie Shrives studied employees who worked at heights at a water services provider and a large civil engineering firm to determine how they viewed the risks of their jobs, what influenced those views, and whether risks might be understated. Seventy workers ranging in age from 20 to 59 responded to the anonymous survey containing questions about work habits, training, and other sources of risk information. The survey also asked workers to rate various factors associated with the risk of falling.

In several cases, the results point to a dichotomy between what

experts view as high risks and what workers viewed as high risks. For example, nearly a quarter of the workers felt that working without specific instructions from line management would result in a low risk of falling while a very few felt that using unfamiliar equipment would result in a very low risk of falling. Both are considered high risk factors by experts.

Risk communication was seen as a major contributor to changing behaviors for the better. Workers reported being most influenced to change their behaviors by training, experiences shared among other workers, and information gleaned from the Internet. Training had encouraged nearly 90% of the workers to make at least some change in their work habits to be safer working at heights. Interestingly enough, the same percentage was found for those who gleaned information from the Internet, highlighting how that medium is increasingly being used as a trusted source of risk information.

For the full story, see http://www.shponline.co.uk/article.asp?pagename=features&article_id=7325

More Frequent Communication Lowers Heart Disease Risk

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.rlriskcom.com>.

Regular doctor-patient communication can lower the risk of developing heart disease, even when much of the communication is via the Internet.

A 4-year study by researchers at Temple University looked at preventing cardiovascular disease in at-risk patients in rural and urban settings by ensuring frequent communication between doctors and patients. Besides regular clinic visits, some patients and doctors also interacted through a web-based health reporting system, allowing more frequent communication. Researchers attribute this additional communication to improving blood pressure and blood lipid levels, and decreasing the overall cardiovascular disease risk.

Study participants were randomly divided into two groups, both of which received blood pressure monitors and pedometers with information on how exercise could prevent heart disease. Both groups regularly visited their doctors, but one group added Internet communication between visits. Patients regularly transmitted blood pressure, weight, and pedometer data via the Internet, and doctors transmitted feedback and educational information. Patients in this second group significantly reduced their cardiovascular disease risk and were able to walk farther.

Researchers theorize that the additional communication gave

patients extra encouragement, the ability to directly question health care providers, and the empowerment to be proactive partners in their health care, which in turn benefitted their overall health. Conversing via the Internet also lowered health care costs.

Additional information can be found at <http://www.dailyindia.com/show/29391.php/Regular-doctor-patient-communication-can-lower-heart-disease-risk>.

Encouraging At-Risk Populations to Act

Do people exposed to devastating risks like wildfires incorporate learning about whether, where, and how to prepare for future risks? The answer, according to research funded by the National Science Foundation, is maybe.

Robin Gregory, senior researcher at Decision Research headquartered in Eugene, Oregon, and Joseph Arvai, professor of Judgment and Decision Making at Michigan State University in East Lansing, led a team of risk perception researchers in examining responses to a series of devastating wildfires in Kelowna, British Columbia, in 2003. More than 45,000 residents were evacuated, more than 300 homes and many businesses were destroyed, and 3 people were killed.

Researchers surveyed two sets of homeowners who had survived the fire. One group had not lost their homes but were at risk for future

(Continued on page 3)

Encouraging At-Risk Populations to Act

(Continued from page 2)

wildfires because they lived in or near highly wooded areas prone to fire. This group felt safer after the fires. They viewed the fires as a one-time, low-probability event. Having lived through it, they felt it would not happen to them again. They were less likely to invest in measures to lower future risks.

The other group of homeowners lived in a nearby town in a similarly wooded area that had escaped fire damage that season. They were more acutely aware of the risk, perceived fire risk as more dangerous, and indicated a strong desire to take action to better understand and decrease future exposure, including erecting fire shelters near their homes and trimming greenery to prevent fire encroachment. They were also most likely to move to a different location to lower their risk.

Researchers felt that these responses are common following any major, life-altering event, whether natural or human-induced. For those who refuse to act, a key piece of risk communication information is that risks are likely to reoccur within the lifetimes of the local residents. Additional information might include specific steps to take to prevent reoccurrence or minimize impacts.

For more information on the study, see

http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summary.jsp?cntn_id=110660&org=NSF&from=news.

Making the Most of Advisory Boards

Agencies often look to advisory boards to understand stakeholder needs in a long-term risk management effort such as an environmental cleanup, disease investigation, or rulemaking activity. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently chartered an advisory board on risk communication, gathering experts from many fields to advise the agency on how to improve efforts to communicate its actions.

The costs to start and maintain an advisory board, from travel to time compensation as well as meeting logistics and staff time to interact with the group, can be staggering. Yet agency sponsors sometimes overlook simple tactics to make the best use of their stakeholder or expert advisors:

- Work out logistics first. Know how the board members will get to meetings, where they'll stay, what they'll discuss, and how they'll report and share this information with them. You don't want them to spend their time worrying over travel arrangements when they should be focusing on how to provide expert advice.
- Provide meaningful background information. Some agencies seem to fear contaminating opinions if they share information before hand. Advisory groups can benefit from broad overviews as well as specific technical data. They

(Continued on page 4)

need to know agency constraints as well. It doesn't help the agency or its relationship with the advisory board if the group provides advice that cannot be acted upon for legal reasons.

- Spend time on team building. Let them get to know each other so they are comfortable sharing opinions and information, and set up a process that allows you to hear all opinions, not just the most vocal ones.

With care, advisory boards can provide a wealth of good input and make risk communication efforts more meaningful and effective.

Extra! Extra! IEEE to Publish Fourth Edition!

The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Press through John Wiley and Sons will be publishing the fourth edition of *Risk Communication: A Handbook for Communicating Environmental, Safety, and Health Risks*. Andrea McMakin and I hope to have the new edition out by early 2009. In the meantime, the third edition will continue to be available through IEEE/Wiley. More information on content will be forthcoming, but if you have thoughts on areas we should discuss, please forward them to lundgren@owt.com.

Websites of Interest

Risk Communication Training and More

<http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/risk2/>

I've mentioned them before, but you can't beat the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine when it comes to training and resources for risk communicators inside and outside the military.

Food Safety Risk Communication Training

<http://jifsan.umd.edu/prodev/sip.cfm>

The Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition offers a summer course in risk communication in Washington, D.C., as well as through distance learning.

Communicating in the First Hours
<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/firsthours/>

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offer information and resources on how to communicate during those all-important first few hours of a terrorist event. The information can also help with other kinds of catastrophic events, such as fires, floods, and hurricanes.