INTRODUCTION TO BIOTERRORISM RISK COMMUNICATION

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1. Pre-event

1.1. SHOULD WE CURRENTLY INFORM THE PUBLIC ON THE POTENTIAL RISK OF A BIOTERRORISM EVENT? IF SO, HOW?

One basic paradigm that lies at the base of many risk communication theories claim that the more we trust the people who are supposed to protect and inform us, the less afraid we will be, and the less we trust them, the greater our fears. If the public trusts the government is dealing with a crisis effectively, there will be less public fear. Still, ideal sense of partnership and trust between authorities and the public is far from present, as repeated surveys have shown. A well-planned communication effort should provide clear precautions, reassure the public, reduce unnecessary distress, and limit inappropriate demands on health-care system [1–3].

Different views exist regarding disclosing to the public preparedness plans for various scenarios of bioterrorism and as to the extent in which the public should be involved. The older paradigm claims that people should know only what the communicators want them to know, in order to get them to behave “rationally” during a crisis – i.e., the way the communicator wants them to behave [2]. This model is criticized by risk communication experts to be “overtly manipulative” and unlikely to succeed. Risk communication is more likely to succeed if it sets the more realistic goal of helping people understand the facts, in ways that are relevant to their own lives, feelings, and values, so they are empowered to put the risk in perspective and make more informed choices [4]. More updated models shift towards giving the public a sense of partnership in the emergency,
rather than conveying the minimum necessary information to keep them calm [5]. Some authors suggest that a citizen advisory panel, comprised of community members respected by and credible to their peers, can be affective mechanism for gaining constructive public participation and dialogue about possible high-concern situations [6].

Public health and media professionals generally agree that the public should be informed, and that risk communication must be tailored to fit specific scenarios, subpopulations and communication media. Still, no consensus exists on the question of how much information should the public be exposed to and what is the appropriate media for it. Furthermore, the scarcity of bioterrorist events makes it even more difficult to reach evidence-based conclusions. Therefore, risk communication experts rely mainly on behavioral theories when planning communication strategies, designing media messages, and analyzing public feedback.

Growing awareness to public communication issues has revolutionized risk communication policies. To prepare risk communication plans at the population level, models such as social amplification of risk model, may be implemented. This model is based on the theory that risk events are portrayed through various signs and images in the media, which interact with a range of psychological, social, institutional, and cultural processes that intensify or attenuate risk perceptions. This model may be helpful in analyzing the ability of agencies to work together, and it highlights the importance of incorporating feedback from the public and media to allow ongoing improvement. On that matter, recent research has established the utility of rapid polling for making informed government responses in an ongoing emergency [7].

Many of the health and risk communication theorists emphasize the need for the careful crafting of the message to be delivered, the choice of suitable and credible spokespersons, timing of message delivery, and the appropriate selection of communication channels [8, 9]. Others stress out the importance of a thorough situational analysis, consideration of the emotional and political climate, provision of information to meet the needs of the intended audience, and respect for people’s capacities [10, 11].

In view of the challenges associated with heterogeneous literacy among various subpopulations, efforts should be directed at drafting messages that can reach and be understood by as many target groups as possible. This would enhance the chances that the messages will be centrally processed and achieve the best results, as outlined by the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) [12]. The ELM is based on the individual’s ability to process a message and determine whether it is processed through “central” or “peripheral” route. Each route may lead to persuasive results, but the central route, which is correlated with high motivation and better message-processing