Principles and Guidelines for Improving Risk Communication

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If we think [the people] are not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion. (Thomas Jefferson, as quoted by William Ruckelshaus, 1983, p. 1027)

INTRODUCTION

In response to rising public concerns about health and environmental risks, government agencies have increasingly sought improved means for communicating risk information to individual citizens and public groups. Part of this increased interest in risk communication stems from current difficulties and frustrations (Ruckelshaus, 1983, 1987; Sandman, 1986; Thomas, 1987; Press, 1987; Covello and Allen, 1988; Slovic, 1987; Davies et al., 1987). Government officials are often frustrated by what they perceive to be inaccurate public perceptions of risk and unrealistic demands by the public for risk reduction. Citizens are often equally frustrated by the government's seeming disinterest in their concerns, unwillingness to take action, and reluctance or unwillingness to allow them to participate in decisions that intimately affect their lives.

Given the potential value of improved risk communication for addressing these problems, the Task Force on Environmental Cancer and Heart and Lung Disease (an inter-

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agency group established by Congress in 1977 and chaired by the Environmental Protection Agency) sponsored a conference in January 1987 on the “Role of Government in Health Risk Communication and Public Education.” The role of nongovernment organizations also was addressed. The conference had five major objectives: (1) to survey existing risk communication activities in the federal government; (2) to identify gaps in research and practice; (3) to examine organizational and institutional barriers to effective risk communication; (4) to foster greater understanding of risk communication objectives and approaches; and (5) to develop means for improving cooperation, collaboration, and coordination among federal agencies.

Conference participants included representatives from more than 14 federal agencies, as well as experts in risk communication from academia, citizen groups, the media, industry, and state and local government. Participants discussed a variety of risk communication issues, including methods to improve specific risk communication skills as well as fundamental issues of trust, credibility, and social responsibility. A basic point of discussion and debate was that improved risk communication can help agencies:

1. Reduce the likelihood that societal attention and resources will be diverted from important problems to less important problems.
2. Reduce the likelihood that individual and public attention will be diverted from significant risks to insignificant risks.
3. Reduce unnecessary human suffering due to high levels of anxiety, fear, outrage, and worry about risks.
4. Reduce levels of public outrage.
5. Reduce the likelihood of bitter and protracted debates and conflicts about risks.
6. Reduce unwarranted tension between communities and agencies.
7. Better understand public perceptions, needs, and concerns.
8. Better anticipate public responses to agency actions.
9. Better inform individuals and communities about important risks.
11. Better inform individuals and communities about agency procedures, processes, and decisions.
12. Make more informed risk management decisions.

All of the participants agreed on the need for improved risk communication by government agencies; however, participants disagreed on the principal causes of risk communication problems. Some participants believed that risk communication problems arise primarily from the information sources (e.g., limitations of risk communicators and risk experts), while others believed that risk communication problems arise primarily from message design (e.g., limitations of scientific risk assessments), the delivery channel (e.g., limitations in the media or means by which risk information is transmitted), or the target audience (e.g., characteristics of the intended recipients of risk communications).

Despite disagreements on the origins of these problems, participants agreed that most risk communication programs lack clear objectives (i.e., informing people about risks, motivating individual action, stimulating emergency response, or contributing to the dispute resolution process). This shortcoming has contributed to a lack of clear guidelines for