

Risk communication for a possible pandemic: lessons from SARS

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Overview

- Review the sorts of problems in which good risk communication can intervene
- What was done right and what was done wrong during SARS?
- Precautionary organisational responses generate strong public support – but they also validate fears
- Media management should have a strong emphasis on image provision

'Panic': defining the problem

Medical Resource problems:

- Unnecessary uptake of pharmaceutical treatment
- 'worried well' – unnecessary use of specialist information
- Demands for priority, specialist care

Economic problems:

- Derive from self-imposed social distance measure: impacts on retail, tourism, hospitality



Problems, cont.

Compliance problems:

- Hygienic and precautionary practices
- Quarantine

Workplace problems:

- Cultivating a culture and practice of caution
- Requiring work

Disadvantage problems:

- Stigmatisation
- Reaching disadvantaged communities

Risk comm issue #1: Uncertainty

- Uncertainty is an inherent feature
- Uncertainty = lack of control = risk signal amplification = high risk perception
- ‘Problems’ are often defined in hindsight, once uncertainty is diminished

Lesson 1

Don't think or talk about panic.

Instead, focus on public behaviour goals.

Address emotion through empathy.

Expert response and public reaction

- IF the scenario is POTENTIALLY catastrophic, experts are likely to recommend a highly precautionary response
- SARS – quarantines, hospital closures, social distance measures
- This was reassuring to the public
- It also validated fears
- Public reactions to fears are constrained by what is within their grasp – consumables, travel, interaction

Lesson 2

Do not expect to be able to perfectly calibrate public response to data

Actions speak louder than words. Expect public response to follow policy action.
(Sandman – expect ‘over’reactions)

Give people precautionary actions they can take, which reasserts their sense of control

What worked during SARS

- Public health leadership (Sheila Basrur)
- Phone banks
- Hygiene messages
- Fever centres
- Questionable – the ‘SARS soap’

What didn't - lessons

- Include termination planning in pandemic/crisis management, and tell people what it is
- Attempt evidence-based containment measures, including research investment in quarantine and border screening protocols
- Offer incidence rates, bury cumulative totals; offer relative more than absolute risk
- Ensure information channels to experts
- Invest in social capital

Media Management

Lesson:

Provide the media with great images that you want to see used.



Discussion points

- Local coverage was praised. Coverage at a distance was highly amplified. (So were reactions to distanced places)
- *Lesson: local media, especially television news, provides an efficient dissemination of crucial risk issue messages. No solution for non-local media.*
- Mass press conference format: made media manageable, but generated 'soap opera' effect, exploitation of external sources
- Talking heads – made management familiar, but could generate confusion – especially with suppressed dissent
- Cultivated relationships with journalists supported accurate coverage

Conclusions

- In Australia, there is some reason to believe that building sustainable public trust will increase compliance and self-regulation
- But only if public values are supported
- Initial reactions are costly
- Investment in communication infrastructure for both public and professionals is crucial