

Communicating during epidemics

March 5 2013



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Disease outbreaks are inevitable, and can often be unpredictable. They are frequently marked by uncertainty, confusion and a sense of urgency. Communication, generally through the media, is an important feature of the outbreak environment. Unfortunately, examples abound of communication failures, which have delayed outbreak control, undermined public trust and unnecessarily prolonged economic, social and political turmoil.

In recent infection outbreaks, one of the major problems has always been communicating with the population in order to influence behaviours, reduce the spread of disease and avoid panic. For centuries the communication strategy adopted by authorities dealing with infectious outbreaks has chiefly been based on denial and verbal reassurances, followed, in a further phase, by restrictive measures (quarantine, isolation, compulsory [hospitalisation](#)) and sanctions for non-compliant individuals. However, researchers and recent events have demonstrated that [human behaviour](#) critically influences infectious disease transmission, which had led to concentrate efforts on education and prescriptive messages.

This is why the Transparent Communication in Epidemics (TELL ME) project is looking into the communication of epidemics. This collaborative project aims to develop original communication strategies, to be employed during an outbreak. The project combines public health, social sciences, [behavioural sciences](#), political sciences, law, ethics, communication and media, in order to develop original communication strategies regarding complicated messages and advice based on uncertainties. The project also addresses vaccine-resistant groups.

The project, which began in November 2012, will first look at how public health communicators should instruct the population about effective preventive actions, like hygienic norms or vaccination. The project aims at promoting transparent communication by delivering evidence-based messages and by involving both citizens and health professionals in decision-making processes.

It will look at past experiences by collecting and assessing evidence about population behavioural response to previous [infectious diseases](#) outbreaks. Studying past cases of epidemic and pandemic outbreaks to analyse population behaviour is a first, necessary step in order to pursue all these objectives of the project. At the same time, it will look at how

communication may change behaviours and what are the new challenges and methods concerning outbreak communication.

Next, the project will assess the role of stakeholders, social media and healthcare professionals in communication, along with the role of digital resources. Great attention will also be given to support vaccine uptake; discontinuous or malicious information and false alarms can lead to distrust towards vaccines, something which has grown stronger in recent years. At the same time, tracking news regarding epidemics and pandemics, promptly reporting any information about new cases of infectious [disease outbreaks](#) and highlighting advances in medical research will be carried out.

The project will eventually create an Integrated Communication Kit for Outbreak Communication, along with simulation software to assess alternative [communication strategies](#). This prototype will simulate the actions and interactions of autonomous decision-making entities within a virtual environment during an epidemic outbreak, in order to observe the emergence of effects at the macro level.

Communicating effectively on evidence-based information will enable businesses, agencies and government to maintain the public's trust. Communicating throughout an outbreak requires transparency - communication must be candid, easily understood, complete and factually accurate. Transparency should characterise every aspect of the relationship between the outbreak communication manager and the public, for it allows the public to "view" the information-gathering, risk-assessing and decision-making processes associated with [outbreak](#) control. The project will enable communication managers to provide not only transparency, but also to create the conditions for exploiting the huge potential that the information society can offer in terms of participatory [communication](#) during epidemics and in epidemic preparedness.

More information: TELLEME project - www.tellmeproject.eu

Provided by CORDIS

Citation: Communicating during epidemics (2013, March 5) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-03-epidemics.html>

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