

Health professionals turn to outside, informal sources for health information during a crisis

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A collaboration between the University of Minnesota and the University of Texas at Austin found healthcare workers expected to provide

treatment for patients with a highly-infectious disease turned to sources outside of their organizations (e.g., professional associations and social media) to find information, in addition to official briefs and memos.

Published in the journal *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, researchers focused their study on health workers at nine hospitals and 13 public health departments in Texas in 2015. It was in the wake of a patient with Ebola [hemorrhagic fever](#) appearing at a Texas hospital in 2014 that resulted in two [health care workers](#) becoming infected.

The study, based on a survey of 526 [health workers](#), found:

- frontline workers at hospitals reported they received enough information on self-care and how to avoid becoming infected with Ebola;
- both hospital and public health department employees did not feel like they had enough information on diagnosis, lab tests, treatment or prevention of Ebola;
- when formal organizational channels did not provide enough information, staff turned to contacts outside of their organizations and informal social media channels to find mission-critical information about Ebola.

"When organizations have a structure that's highly formalized with many rules and procedures, there are typically explicit rules about communication in the workplace. This can slow down the flow of information in crisis," said Betty Zhou, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Carlson School of Management and co-principal investigator on this study. "Sometimes employees feel it's easier to reach out to informal contacts, whether in professional groups or at state and federal agencies."

Zhou suggests their research, while focused on the public health concerns surrounding Ebola in Texas, offers important lessons for organizations when it comes to sharing information during a crisis situation.

"Our research illustrates that organizations need to create new communication channels designed for rapid response during crisis that consist of timely and accurate information," said Zhou. "They should also understand and proactively manage disseminating information through nontraditional channels, such as [social media](#)."

Researchers note this study is based on a small snapshot of the public health system, due to the fact the Ebola cases were contained and due to the level of study participation.

More information: Bo Xie et al. Ebola-Related Health Information Wanted and Obtained by Nurses and Public Health Department Employees: Effects of Formal and Informal Communication Channels, *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness* (2019). [DOI: 10.1017/dmp.2019.45](#)

Provided by University of Minnesota

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