“In the next influenza pandemic, be it now or in the future, be the virus mild or virulent, the single most important weapon against the disease will be a vaccine. The second most important will be communication.”

- JOHN M. BARRY, 2009

Our Background

TELL ME (Transparent communication in Epidemics: Learning Lessons from experience, delivering effective Messages, providing Evidence) is a European Commission funded, collaborative project that has systematically reviewed existing evidence to develop practical guidance, online tools and models for improved risk and crisis communication during pandemics.

A major problem during infection outbreaks is communicating with the public and healthcare professionals, to influence behaviours, deal with deeply entrenched beliefs and views and reduce the spread of disease. Communication is a critical step towards influencing public perceptions and attitudes. Since the outbreak of the H1N1 or “swine flu” virus, communication has become a central issue for managing risk.

Communication is strengthened when institutions, healthcare professionals and other community actors who form part of the wider social network engage in constructive, open and transparent dialogue and information exchange. Public health officials must devise new strategies for meeting the information needs of the public and dealing with deeply entrenched beliefs and views that oppose recommendations made by official bodies.

The main objectives of TELL ME are about communicating with the public to influence behaviours, reduce the spread of disease, avoid panic, build and maintain confidence in governmental responses during pandemics. In this context, the TELL ME project seeks to address three research questions:

• How can the general public be better motivated or positively influenced to take effective preventive measures during the outbreak?

• Which are the most appropriate communication methods to deal with the complexity, uncertainty, misinformation and malicious information?

• What are the best communication strategies to maximise vaccine uptake, and to assist health professionals and agencies to cope with vaccine-resistant groups?

The TELL ME Framework Model

Research suggests that in order to succeed, risk communication requires a multi-layered approach taking into consideration technological, cultural and social developments. The TELL ME Framework Model offers a new look on the inter-relationships between seven components of risk communication: public sphere, segmentation, mass media, social media, opinion leaders, research and stakeholders.

The objective of the Model is to demonstrate the non-linear nature of outbreak communication and show that all stakeholders are cross-connected and able to influence situations, while at the same time all form part of the public sphere.

To be effective therefore, outbreak communications must be a dialogue between all stakeholders, with the public sphere very much at the centre. Members of the general public should not be perceived simply as stakeholders, but as partners in the process of outbreak communication - not passive recipients of messages but active collaborators in the formulation of strategies.

The significance of the Framework Model is that it integrates relevant concepts and theories with a practical approach that can be adapted to specific risk situations and serve as the foundation for a practical guide for outbreak communication.
TELL ME research and focus groups with HCPs across Europe and the US found that HCPs themselves felt social media should be used more widely to improve communications with the public. Many HCPs use social media to exchange clinical information, search for and discuss career opportunities and engage in discussions on the latest health news and research. HCPs can amplify and add credibility to public health messages on social media during a crisis.

BMJ's doc2doc has over 70,000 registered users. The French Réseau Santé Social (RSS) has over 50,000 full members. However, throughout the literature a lack of HCP participation in planning for a pandemic and developing seasonal flu vaccination campaigns is apparent. If social media is to be adopted as a serious crisis communications tool by HCPs, Institutions need to properly quantify and integrate the value of social media as a means to spread public health messages.

In addition to HCPs, there should be a wider use of opinion leaders at a local level to disseminate health messages. From the interviews we have conducted with bloggers, it was evident that they are thirsty for information and cooperation with governmental authorities. In order to improve communications with the public, organisations should be asked more widely for feedback on public opinion, engagement, and social media.

Tell ME research and focus groups with HCPs across Europe and the US

Healthcare Professionals (HCPs) and Social Media

Harnessing Spokespeople

Engage with opinion leaders

Understand attitudes, issues & perceptions

Build trust & confidence

Recruit trusted spokespeople

Dispel myths & rumours

Address fears & concerns

Evaluate response to communications

Mediate communications through trusted source

Pre-test messages with focus groups

HOW GOVERNMENTS AND HEALTH AUTHORITIES COMMUNICATED

HOW THE PUBLIC COMMUNICATED

The H1N1 was “the first pandemic with a blogosphere and other rapid social media communication tools that were impossible to ignore” (ECDC, 2010) and WHO declared that the use of new information technologies should be an essential part of strategic communications planning (WHO, 2011). It was also clear that H1N1 was the first pandemic with a blogosphere and other rapid social media communication tools that were impossible to ignore (ECDC, 2010) and where the rapid social media communication tools that were impossible to ignore (ECDC, 2010) and where the rapid
Presence before a crisis

An interactive two-way process

Comprehensive and flexible

Timing

Credibility, accountability, transparency and honesty

Proactive stance

Monitor social media and trending topics

Appealing to Health Care Professionals

Online communities as a resource

Information needs of various key stakeholders

Ten Golden Rules of Risk Communication

How does Twitter deal with misinformation?

Case study 2: How does Twitter deal with misinformation?
For more information on the TELL ME project or to access the guidance documents and tools, please go to www.tellmeproject.eu

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