

PART II

TAKING ACTION AND EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING DURING AN OUTBREAK

CONDUCT A RAPID ASSESSMENT

Before making any decisions in a crisis situation, a “Rapid Assessment” must be conducted. This is essentially a quick analysis of the situation at hand based on existing data and documents (epidemiological and other), field reports, risk assessments, surveillance data, media messages and anecdotal reports. The team should ask itself, “What do we know about our particular situation?” (See *Rapid Assessment Guide in Appendix C for more guidance.*)

While gathering the information for the quick assessment, staff should also begin planning the components of a Communication Plan of Action. Keep in mind that, if possible, you should validate and record all sources of information if there is any doubt whatsoever as to its legitimacy. If any level of doubt exists, corroborate the information with other sources.

Ideally, the rapid assessment should take 24 hours, as your stakeholders will likely be clamoring for information. During an outbreak situation, it is critical to communicate your action plan and information as quickly as possible. Oftentimes the public judges the success of your overall operation by the success and timeliness of your communications.

Following is a Rapid Assessment Checklist that you can use as a guide. Additional considerations that are unique to your organization or situation can be added.

RAPID ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

<p>Basic Information – Animals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Where has the outbreak been confirmed? <input type="checkbox"/> How widespread has the outbreak been (numbers of chickens, farms, sectors affected (commercial or informal)? <input type="checkbox"/> What types of animals have been affected (wild birds, chickens, ducks)? <input type="checkbox"/> How have the animals been affected (# ill, # dead)? What symptoms did the affected animals exhibit? <input type="checkbox"/> How does it appear to have been transmitted? <input type="checkbox"/> What does the geographical distribution look like and does it appear to be spreading? If so, in which direction? What are the trends?
<p>Basic Information – Humans</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Have any human cases been reported? <input type="checkbox"/> If so, how many people were affected, where, their ages and genders, how do they appear to have become infected, what is their current status or severity of illness, what were their symptoms, what treatments did they receive, and what was their response to treatment?
<p>Actions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Who is in charge? Who has the authority to make final decisions on behalf of the government? <input type="checkbox"/> What is being done by various national and local government agencies to address and control the outbreak? Is it adequate (assessment)? <input type="checkbox"/> Have any officials visited the site? Are there plans for a site visit – if so, when? <input type="checkbox"/> Have any officials already instructed people on what they can do? If so, what have they told people? <input type="checkbox"/> Have the media reported the outbreak? If so, which media, and what are they saying? <input type="checkbox"/> What organizations are working in the area? How can they be mobilized for information?
<p>Communication Response Capacity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Who is providing official updates on the situation – Who is the main contact? <input type="checkbox"/> How can I best maintain contact with this person or organization? <input type="checkbox"/> Who is making decisions on what information is being released? <input type="checkbox"/> Who is releasing information? <input type="checkbox"/> What does the media know? Are they covering the story or just learning about it? <input type="checkbox"/> What media reaches that community or region?

<p>Communication Response Capacity (continued)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Have any media activities or training taken place in the area on AI response? <input type="checkbox"/> Is private industry/corporations responding? How often/when will updates be provided? <input type="checkbox"/> Who is responsible for which tasks/decisions? <input type="checkbox"/> Have any links been established with key community members (e.g. for allaying panic, health education and improved case-detection)? <input type="checkbox"/> Do information materials exist (e.g., PSAs, guides for culling, disposing of dead birds, what a family or health provider should do to protect their family)? Are they in the correct languages? How will these materials and information be distributed?
<p>Health Services Response Capacity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> What steps have local health officials taken to organize outbreak response? <input type="checkbox"/> Is there a plan of action, standardized reporting procedures, trained staff? <input type="checkbox"/> Are human and animal health care workers equipped to use personal protective equipment and other materials such as disinfectants? <input type="checkbox"/> Are there trained vaccinators? Stocks of vaccine? <input type="checkbox"/> Are there treatments available? What are they? <input type="checkbox"/> Do medical, nursing and laboratory personnel need further training on case-detection and safe patient management?
<p>Outstanding Needs and Questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Are external resources –WHO, FAO - needed to contain the avian influenza outbreak? <input type="checkbox"/> If so, which resources are still needed (culling equipment, drugs, personal protective equipment, disinfectants, soap, manpower, expert/technical assistance, logistics, funding, communication equipment)? <input type="checkbox"/> How much will this cost? <input type="checkbox"/> What resources exist (e.g., funding, manpower, equipment)? <input type="checkbox"/> Has assistance been requested from outside organizations or other communities/governments? <input type="checkbox"/> What are the best-case, worst-case and most-likely scenarios? <input type="checkbox"/> Is there any sense for how this outbreak will be resolved? <input type="checkbox"/> Who are potential partners? Does an alliance exist on AI – whether it is active or non-active? <input type="checkbox"/> Who or what organizations can help and whom can you depend on?

Determine Immediate Response and Make Assignments

Based on the rapid assessment, your internal AI Communication Task Force or decision-makers can then decide on emergency actions you should and are able to pursue. For example, if cases of avian influenza have been reported but not confirmed, it will be important to find out if a team of veterinary health officials have been dispatched to the site of the outbreak to confirm that it is, indeed, avian influenza. Your human or veterinary health officer could visit NGOs or other human and animal health officials in the region (or in the government) to get a status report and offer support. Part of this Immediate Response is the Communication Plan of Action, which follows.

Develop a Communication Plan of Action

A written Communication Plan of Action should ultimately be endorsed by senior management in advance, and has essentially three main desired outcomes:

- Determining what types of information will be disseminated by your organization;
- Determining who will deliver that information (e.g., a spokesperson); and
- Deciding how to follow up on these activities.

Following are steps to guide you through the process of undertaking communications tasks in an outbreak situation. This table allows for your Task Force to fill in your specific goals, target audiences, messages, and chosen communication tools and channels.

COMMUNICATION PLAN OF ACTION -- DEVELOPMENT PROCESS		
Goals	Considerations	Your Input
Identify and Obtain Consensus on Communication Goals	<p>Goals can include messages and activities conveying desired actions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preventing transmission of H5N1 from animal-to-animal and animal-to-human • Required reporting of all suspected animal and human cases of avian influenza • Cooking all poultry including eggs until they are well-done • Preparing farmers for culling and subsequent procedures (e.g., compensation) as an important step to control the spread of avian influenza • How to properly and safely dispose of dead birds 	<i>List your task force/organization goals here.</i>
Identify Target Audiences	<p>It is important to identify the types of organizations or individuals that will need to receive information on an outbreak. These audiences can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Health officials • Veterinary health workers including para-veterinary workers) • Private sector organizations including trade associations and poultry processors and vendors • Livestock traders • Government information officers • Ministry of Health officials, health officials, health workers and volunteers • Community leaders (faith-based groups, women’s unions, child welfare officials) • The media and journalists • The general public. 	<i>List your task force/organization’s target audiences here.</i>
Identify Priority Channels of Communication	<p>Once you identify your target audiences, the next step is to determine the best ways to reach them. Each audience may have a different channel through which to reach them.</p>	<i>List your task force/organization’s priority communication channels here.</i>

COMMUNICATION PLAN OF ACTION -- DEVELOPMENT PROCESS (CONTINUED)

Goals	Considerations	Your Input
<p>Identify Priority Channels of Communication</p>	<p>This can include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an emergency telephone information hotline that people can call to obtain up-to-date information • community-based communications (community meetings, house visits, etc.) • loudspeaker announcements • radio or television announcements. <p>Community organizations that can be engaged to help deliver messages include religious groups, women’s union members, or other community health workers.</p>	
<p>Identify International Resources</p>	<p>It will also be important to keep open the lines of communication with international organizations you may have worked with in your region (e.g., USAID, FAO, WHO). These organizations have addressed avian influenza outbreaks in many other areas of the world, and will be a helpful source of information and guidance.</p>	<p><i>List relevant international resources for your task force/ organization here.</i></p>
<p>Decide on the Messages to be Conveyed</p>	<p>You will need to decide which types of emergency messages you would like to communicate to various audiences. <i>To assist in this process, please refer to Appendix H for sample Emergency Messages.</i> Regardless of messages, it is important to keep communications culturally relevant, consistent and clear. If your messages are too complicated, they could lead to misinformation or confusion among your audiences.</p>	<p><i>List your task force/organization’s messages here.</i></p>
<p>Determine the Materials to be Distributed</p>	<p>You will need to disseminate materials to your various audiences to provide information and guidance, as well as to motivate and reassure them. Information would include what to do if sick; what do to if high poultry deaths; and how to properly dispose of dead poultry. Some of these materials can include press releases or media advisories, fact sheets, educational flyers, and brochures with contact information.</p>	<p><i>List your task force/organization’s products/materials to be distributed here.</i></p>

COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY DURING THE CRISIS/OUTBREAK

What the Public Expects

In any kind of serious crisis, people experience increased levels of stress and anxiety. People are fearful for their safety and the wellbeing of their loved ones, in addition to having concern for their material possessions. Because emotions are heightened and people are stressed, they receive information differently, process information differently, and act on information differently than during the normal course of events.⁴

You should be aware that the typical ways in which you communicate with your community may not be effective during and after it suffers a crisis. Risk communication researchers have recommended that your key message should take no longer than 10 seconds to communicate, be no longer than 30 words, and that you should not burden your audience with more than three messages. Make sure you project empathy and honesty from the beginning.

Important Points to Keep in Mind for Emergency Risk Communications

- Identify yourself and your credentials, as well as anyone else who speaks to the media or to the public at large.
- Tell people what they can do to protect themselves or improve the situation.
- Repeat your key messages.
- Be consistent in the messages you convey.
- Frame your actions in the positive.
- Ensure timely release of information.
- Treat the public (and the media) as intelligent adults. Do not “talk down”.
- Dispel rumors as quickly as possible with facts and statistics.
- Do not speculate – if you do not know the answer, say so, but indicate you will find out and do report back.
- Acknowledge uncertainty. Do not be afraid to say you do not know.

Experts have estimated that what you say and how you act and appear in the first 9 to 30 seconds will determine whether your audience will trust you.

In your initial communications, identify members of the Communications Task Force and the overall national/local avian influenza emergency response team, as well as their roles and responsibilities. This will avoid public power struggles, as well as reassure people that action is being taken.

It is important to note that the public includes everyone in an outbreak situation, including governmental and nongovernmental officials, the media, infected individuals and their families, physicians/nurses/veterinarians, hospital personnel, health agency employees, market vendors, farmers and agriculture officials, emergency response personnel and the public at large.

⁴ Reynolds, 2004.

What the Media Expects

During an outbreak of avian influenza, the media is one of your partners. They will be your most efficient resource for distributing messages to your community and for gathering information. They need correct and complete information in a timely manner. They want access to those making decisions and to those in authority. They expect information released by a government or civil society to be factual and current. If it is not, they will not trust you or your organization as a credible source of information. Once that trust is lost it will be difficult to recapture.

The media often has rigid deadlines and news cycles, and those will dictate when you respond or report out information. Therefore, be aware of what the deadlines are for a report or a news outlet and conduct your press briefings or issue a statement to accommodate their schedule. If you are not sensitive to that, they will look for other sources which may be unauthorized or making incorrect statements that will contribute to panic and rumors.

You may have to meet the press without having new information to report -- for example, to discuss how the virus was introduced into a community. This would be an appropriate time to make available one of the health or emergency experts to provide background information on the virus; steps being taken by the government or donors to respond to the outbreak; or the timeline for more information being made available.

Prepare news bulletins or press releases that can be distributed electronically via the web or in hard copy form. If you have access to photos or images to accompany these releases that would also be welcomed. Make sure they are high-quality and can be reproduced in various media. Make available contact information for updates, including a web site, email address, and mobile phones.

It will not be possible to satisfy all the desires of the press during an outbreak situation, but knowing in advance what they want, and managing those expectations will help you immensely because it shows you understand and respect them. Among the needs of reporters are:

- Equal access to information that is accurate and evidence-based
- Honest answers to questions, rapid correction of information that turns out to be incorrect or misleading, and acknowledging when answers are not available (and when they might be available).
- Timely release of information
- A regular schedule of updates and news conferences
- Access to technical experts on avian influenza epidemiology, biology, veterinary science, and vaccinology.

For additional guidance on media preparation, refer to Appendix D – Ingredients for a Successful Interview and Appendix E – Guide to Press Conferences.

Message Development

The basis of avian influenza message that can be used by your organization can be prepared in advance, relying on the latest body of evidence from the scientific community. One of the roles of your scientific authorities is to help explain and interpret the technical language into layman's terms. As new knowledge is released, the messages can be modified if necessary. Messages should be constructed for the general public, people at the highest risk of infection, and for stakeholders. An essential component of deciding on messages is to consider the concerns and needs of the various stakeholders or audiences you are trying to reach. A clear and concise message or response can be developed in response to each of these stakeholder concerns – some of which were previously addressed in “What the Public Expects.” Other concerns might involve livestock, personal safety and health, family health, finances and family/community livelihood, and legal/regulatory issues.

Some suggested message points are listed in *Appendix F—Message Points on the Prevention and Control of Avian Influenza*, and are organized based on prevention and control of bird-to-bird transmission, bird-to-human transmission, and human-to-human transmission. They are also grouped by relevance to pre-outbreak, outbreak, and post-outbreak situations.

For all messages that are developed, it is important to be sensitive to cultural/ethnic norms in your target audience. For example, depending on your location in the world, there are different cultural meanings for words, signs, symbols and images. There are also different cultural standards for what topics are considered inappropriate or humorous. Thus, any messages developed should take into account local norms and values, as well as languages and dialects.

Your First Communication to the Media/Stakeholders

First and foremost, it will be important that the public knows that you are aware of the outbreak and that there is a system in place to respond. Your first official message during an outbreak of avian influenza, should contain following elements.⁴

1. Recognition of the severity of the outbreak/situation.
2. What you know about the outbreak/situation.
3. Confirmed facts and action steps. Tell people what actions they can take to minimize risks to their family and animals (e.g., practice good hygiene, avoid poultry farms and wet markets, isolate your poultry from other animals, assume that all poultry is infected, steps on how to properly dispose of dead birds).

⁴ Adapted from CDC's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication by Leaders for Leaders.

4. What the process is for addressing the outbreak.
5. Schedule of updates and other timelines.
6. Where to go for regularly updated information on the situation. Have your web site, hotlines, or email addresses operating and state the contact information in briefings and also on all printed materials.

Other pointers to keep in mind to reach the public through working with the media are:

- During an infectious disease outbreak keep your message short, simple and focused. Do not overload your audiences with too much information – only enough for them to absorb and act on. Your communications should contain only two to three distinct messages.
- Avian Influenza is a virus and most of the information about it will originate from scientific/technical experts and sources. It is important to translate this technical information into laymen’s terms so it can be understood by all audiences.
- Repeating correct information and telling people what you want them to do is important. The more people are exposed to information the more likely they are to remember it and actually adapt the the desired behaviors. Providing information both orally and in writing will also increase the chances that the public will retain it.
- Messages that describe or demonstrate what not to do are less effective at changing behavior than messages that model the desired behaviors. Examples of positive messages are “Use gloves when touching dead birds,” or “Dispose of dead birds by burning or burial only.” It is better to model what you want people to do, not what you want them to not do. It is important to note, however, that there are exceptions to this in certain cultures, where some people have been found to ignore positive messages but will pay attention if there is a strong “don’t” statement.

Within two weeks following an outbreak, or after the initial phase of crisis/emergency response is completed, your organization will want to take a step back and consider how things have progressed thus far and what long-term changes or additional actions should be undertaken. It will be important to look back on what you accomplished and whether it was successful in meeting your communication goals.

It is important to reflect on your activities with your Avian Influenza Communication Task Force and identify any lessons learned. These lessons will form the basis of what your organization decides to do over the long term to help prevent and control the spread of avian influenza.

Even if you have planned for an outbreak, infectious diseases are notoriously unpredictable, and the situation may not have unfolded in an expected way in your region.

Among the issues to evaluate is how effective your message delivery and reach was, whether the media coverage was adequate and correct and what types of public responses you received to your messages. For example, did the target audience understand and act upon what was communicated to them? Have the media stories been fair and accurate? Your organization might want to explore obtaining technical assistance for evaluation of your communication plan and outbreak response activities.

Ongoing Follow-Up

Once the immediate “emergency” has passed, follow-up activities should continue. Among these are determining how often you want to provide situational updates to your audiences/constituencies. You may also want to maintain contact with journalists who have covered the story to provide updates and nurture the relationship for future events.

