



**Report on the Avian and Pandemic
Risk Communication Workshops
Organized by PAHO and the Governments of
Jamaica
and Trinidad and Tobago,
January 11-12; and 17-18, 2007**

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This is a report on two two-day workshops on Avian and Pandemic Risk Communication held in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, presented through collaboration between the Pan American Health Organization and the Ministries of Health, and Agriculture in both countries, and funded by USAID. The first workshop was held in Jamaica in the Conference Room of the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (CFNI), January 11-12 (See Annex 1); and the second in Trinidad, at the Cascadia Hotel, January 17-18, 2007 (Annex 2).

This report includes:

- A description of the workshop, and its context
- A review of the workshop objectives.
- An assessment of the results of the workshop, with respect to the objectives.
- Comments and recommendations by participants to advance the state of preparedness in their countries and to strengthen national capacity.

A. Participants

Participants included: public education, information and communication personnel in the governmental and non governmental sectors in the English speaking Caribbean and Suriname, including: media, disaster preparedness managers/coordinators, medical practitioners veterinarians and other public health environmental personnel (Annex 3 and 4).

B. Workshop Context

The workshops took place in the context of:

- Three previous workshops held in Barbados, Trinidad and Washington D.C. to develop and strengthen skills in preparing and delivering risk communication messages; and to provide guidance in preparing and or updating action plans. At least 50 percent of the participants attended at least one of the previously held sessions.
- One-day visit of PAHO technical advisors to each country to provide guidelines in preparing a national plan, including communications, using a prepared template.
- A malaria outbreak in Jamaica, which raised public awareness and alarm about a potential health crisis, challenged the response capabilities of the Ministry of Health, and revealed gaps in preparedness plans in general and crisis communication skills in particular. The unfortunate experience in Jamaica, however, was taken as a useful wake-up call for all the countries about the importance of crisis communication in advance of (and during) an actual avian influenza outbreak in poultry, and an actual human pandemic. Although to date the outbreak is confined to Jamaica, the alarm bells were also sounded in the other countries, especially as most at the time were poised to be involved directly or indirectly (the latter from spill-over effect) from the flow of visitors to the Caribbean to attend the Cricket World Cup (CWC) competition that began in March 2007.

C. Objectives of the workshop

Objectives:

1. Review the extent of communication preparedness for, and identify challenges and constraints in coping with AI and a possible influenza pandemic.
2. Provide guidance in preparing and or updating action plans
3. Develop/strengthen skills in preparing and delivering crisis communication messages
4. Establish clear, intra and inter-country linkages between existing communication teams

Specific Objectives:

1. Action plans reviewed/updated
2. Media relations skills strengthened
3. Regional electronic network established
4. Update on avian influenza in birds and poultry status provided

Methodology

1. Table top and simulation exercises (Responding to a crisis)
 - Public health response to AI scare in a farm community
 - Nearby country announcement
 - Coping with local and international media
 - Government response to Pandemic Declaration
 - Messaging
2. Presentations
3. Review of plans in the context of lessons learned
4. Presentation of Caribbean Flu Wiki proposal: Review of proposal for establishing national and subregional linkages
5. Handouts provided of the list of crisis communication recommendations along with copies of a CD with a wide range of related information, prepared and disseminated at previous workshops.

Result:

While a great deal of awareness was raised among all attendees, especially first time participants, several acknowledged that the issue of a possible avian influenza or a human pandemic influenza was not given the highest priority by government planners and decision makers. Additionally, although there had been three previous workshops in some cases the representatives were totally new to the information and some acknowledged being unfamiliar with any planning activities being done in their countries. In some cases, there clearly were lapses in internal communication. For example, in the case of one country, Antigua, the representative said he had no knowledge of the fairly comprehensive communication strategy drafted by a team in that country following the one-day meeting mounted by the Office of Caribbean Program Coordination (OCPC), nor was he familiar with the team. He did commit to becoming involved with the process on his return to the country.

The attendees were asked to review the PAHO-produced checklist of activities for developing a communication strategy and rate their country's response to date on a scale of 1-3 with 1 being the lowest and 3 the highest. Besides Antigua, based on the responses provided at both workshops, Barbados was the only country that could be regarded at level 3, while Bermuda and Jamaica had made some progress in drafting a communication strategy. The representative from Barbados gave a report at the Trinidad workshop on the country's progress in drafting a communication plan and indicated their willingness to share this with the other countries. Belize, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica all reported some progress in drafting a

communication component to their national plan, however, these were yet to be written. Most of the other participants acknowledged work in progress on their national plan although they were not sufficiently familiar with same to provide a report and were unaware of any significant effort to date in addressing the activities on the communication checklist. In some cases, e.g. St Lucia, Guyana and Surinam, the representatives were new to the process. St Kitts and Nevis was the sole OECS country not represented. Significantly, perhaps, neither were there any communication or public education personnel represented at the national one day planning exercise previously held in St Kitts, although the country was represented at the workshop in Washington.

Participants agreed that the proposed Flu Wiki website was a useful tool for building linkages in risk and crisis communication, also for sharing information on work in progress and lessons learnt in the respective countries. Participants at the Jamaica workshop affirmed the need for identifying a focal point to help maintain the information flow on Caribbean Flu Wiki, which Caribbean journalist Terry Ally who presented the proposal at both workshops, agreed to help moderate.

Comment

Based on information available to the PAHO/WHO pandemic team in the subregion, every country currently has at least a preliminary draft plan with or without a crisis communication element, although, unlike Barbados, none was prepared to present a verbal report, nor have so far indicated a readiness to expose their work in progress at the Flu Wiki website site, as do countries from many other regions. At the Jamaica workshop, some of the countries indicated a desire to commit to posting their plans within a specified time frame but it was eventually agreed that that decision should be forthcoming from the Permanent Secretaries or other decision maker in the various countries. Based on the responses at both workshops, there remains much work to be done in implementing the activities on the communication checklist and the overall sentiments expressed was that PAHO'S support here would be welcomed.

During the closing session discussions at both workshops, the participants in general rated the exercise highly, and most committed themselves to contributing to moving the planning process along in their own country and sharing experiences and lessons learnt on the proposed Caribbean internet site.

Recommendations:

The shortage of full-time public education or social communication expertise in the Health as well as Agriculture Ministry, and/or the demands of other priority health issues are likely militating factors to the planning process. Nevertheless, from the general response, most of the countries are further along in understanding issues related to avian influenza in birds and poultry, as well as a human influenza pandemic and guided by the available checklist of activities, have a clearer sense of what effective communication preparedness entails. The following are two lists of recommendations from each of the workshops compiled at the closing session of each.

Jamaica

1. RE: Proposal to launch Caribbean Flu Wiki on the Internet

People must be informed of the website, which will only be effective if everyone contributes; contributions will depend on content

With support of PAHO, encourage the Caribbean/CARICOM countries to submit a summary of their National Plan to Caribbean Flu Wiki website by end of February 2007 (prior to World Cup Cricket) and to collect relevant information related to plan (poultry populations, etc.)

All plans will be understood to be a work in progress (in draft/working form)

Obtain information on poultry belts in the Caribbean from Ministries of Agriculture by June 2007

Create an in-country mechanism for tracking unusual events related to AI

Rumors are not to be put onto website - instead use of a restricted network

Create a Caribbean network for the sharing of information related to AI

2. Communications

Use checklist to guide development/update of communications plans

Communications checklist to be completed by end of February 2007

Risk and crisis management and communication workshops should be held annually at a minimum, preferably twice a year

Encourage and promote crisis communication training for all Ministers of Health, Agriculture and Information

Future workshop should also include media relations for non-crisis situations--inclusion of media in all forms

Use existing teleconference facilities to provide training to all countries

Development of training manual for the Caribbean

Encourage countries, with PAHO support, to host regular risk and crisis communication workshops

Incorporate persons from Government Information Services in planning and assistance with workshops

Attempt to incorporate other journalists/media within country to assist in training

Combine theory with practical information during training

3. Other

Focal points must be identified and PAHO should formally request countries to identify focal point in risk/crisis communication.

Trinidad Workshop Recommendations

1. Establish a forum to test this workshop e.g. tabletop simulation
2. Train policy makers and other technical people in risk and crisis communication list of recommendations
3. Undertake communication activities aimed at raising national level of outrage – nothing will happen

4. Convene National workshops to finalize plans
5. Promote media sensitization initiatives
6. Ensure involvement of emergency response coordinators
7. Share experiences and information to facilitate consistency (of information)
8. Organize regional forum to develop messages

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