Volume 4:
How dangerous is the problem?
- Communicating the Risk

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This guide forms part of a series which is aimed at water supply agencies, water resource managers, workers in health-related fields, as well as communities throughout South Africa. The guide is intended to provide awareness-building information to keep water supplies clean of microbial contamination and thus reduces the incidence of water-related diseases.

The publication of the report emanates from WRC project no 1400A entitled *Guide on water-related Microbial Diseases.*

The following reports form part of this series on Guides on the Management of Mivro Water-related diseases: Management of Water-related Microbial Disease

Volume 1: What is the problem? - Disease Characteristics
Volume 2: What causes the problem? - A What to do for Water Suppliers following Diarrhoea Incidents
Volume 3: How great is the problem? - Health Impact Assessment
Volume 4: How dangerous is the problem? - Communicating the Risk
Volume 5: What we and our children need to know? - Health & Hygiene Awareness

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Water-related microbial disease such as cholera causes untold misery in communities across South Africa every year. As part of the effort to promote awareness and understanding of the conditions promoting infectious disease transmission, water service providers are increasingly required to have a risk communication programme in place.

This guideline document presents the fourth in a five-volume series aimed at addressing the question of how best South Africans can protect themselves from water-related microbial diseases. It provides a framework of principles and guidelines for the communication of health risks, specifically for water service providers.

Communicating with the public is an essential element of health risk communication. Ineffective communication often results in conflict, which in turn leads to the erosion of public confidence, and inefficient use of water service providers' resources. The recognition that people are entitled to make decisions about issues that affect their lives can assist water service providers in forming a better understanding of, and formulating more appropriate reactions to, a particular risk. Appropriate risk communication not only promotes consistency and transparency in arriving at and implementing risk management decisions, it also fosters public trust and confidence in the safety of the water supply.

It is hoped that this document will assist water service providers, government departments, water boards, local authorities and CMA's in communicating with the public when a water quality issue arises that could have a potential impact on health. In this way, the guide will hopefully make a significant contribution protecting our most vulnerable communities against water-related microbial disease.

This handbook was commissioned by the Water Research Commission.

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Introduction

Water service providers need to have a risk communication programme in place for an increasing number of factors. Examples include microbiological or chemical hazards. It has been recognised that for risk communication to be effective it needs to be a continued and evolving process and not simply a crisis management measure (WHO, 2001).

The purpose of this Guideline Document is to provide a framework of principles and guidelines for the communication of health risks specifically for water providers1. The document will provide guidelines and examples that will assist water service providers in communicating with the public when a water quality issue arises that has a potential impact on health. Communicating with the public is an essential element of health risk communication. The Guideline Document is intended for water service providers, government departments, water boards, municipalities and district councils.

Description of health risk communication

Health risk communication is the exchange of information and opinions concerning risk and risk-related factors among risk assessors, risk managers, consumers and other interested parties.

It is not merely the dissemination of information. If well managed, it will ensure that the message is constructively formulated, transmitted and received will result in meaningful actions.

The objectives of health risk communication is to:

- Inform he public of risks.
- Understand the significance of potential risks.
- Manage perceptions.

Risk communication can help risk managers understand why the public perceives X as being more dangerous than Y. This understanding, in turn, can lead to changes in policy X that will help bring the public and the expert assessment of the risk closer together.

Goals of risk communication

- Promote awareness and understanding of the specific issues under consideration during the risk analysis process.
- Promote consistency and transparency in arriving at and implementing risk management decisions.
- Provide a sound basis for understanding the risk management decisions proposed or implemented.
- Contribute to the development and delivery of effective information and education programmes, when these are selected as risk management options.
- Foster public trust and confidence in the safety of water supply.
- Strengthen the working relationship and mutual respect among all participants.
- Promote the appropriate involvement of all interested parties in the risk communication process.

1 A water service provider means any person who provides water services to consumers or to other water services institutions.

PART 1

Issues and principles for health risk and communication

Myths and actions

Belief in some common myths often interferes with the development of an effective risk communication programme. Consider the following myths and the actions you can take in response.

Myth	Action
We don't have enough time and resources to have a risk communication programme.	Train all your staff to communicate more effectively Plan projects so that time to involve the public is included.
Telling the public about a risk is more likely to unduly alarm people than keeping quiet.	Decrease potential for alarm by giving people a chance to express their concerns.
Communication is less important than education. If people knew the true risks, they would accept them.	Pay as much attention to the process of dealing with people as you do to explaining the data.
We shouldn't go to the public until we have solutions to water quality problems.	Release and discuss information about risk management options and involve communities in strategies in which they have a stage.
These issues are too difficult for the public to understand.	Distinguish public disagreement with your policies from misunderstanding of the highly technical issues.
Technical issues should be left in the hands of the technical people.	Provide the public with information. Listen to community concerns. Involve staff with diverse backgrounds in developing policy.
Risk communication is not my job.	As a public servant, you have a responsibility to the public. Learn to integrate communication into your job and help others do the same.
If we give them the pinky, they'll take the hand.	If you listen to people when they are asking for pinkies, they are less likely to demand hands. Avoid the battleground. Involve people early and often.
If we listen to the public, we will devote scarce resources to issues that are not a great threat to public health.	Listen early and avoid controversy and the potential for disproportionate attention to lesser issues.
Activist groups are responsible for stirring up unwarranted concerns.	Activists help to focus public anger. Many environmental groups are reasonable and responsible. Work with groups rather than against them.

Rules of risk communication

- Accept and involve the public as a partner: Your goal is to produce an informed public, not to defuse public concerns or replace actions.
- Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts: Different goals, audiences, and media require different actions.
- Listen to the public's specific concerns: People often care more about trust, credibility, competence, fairness and empathy than about statistics and details.
- Be honest, frank and open: Trust and credibility are difficult to achieve - once lost they are almost impossible to regain.
- Work with other credible sources: Conflicts and disagreements among organisations make communication with the public much more difficult.
- Meet the needs of the media: The media are usually more interested in politics than risk, simplicity than complexity, danger than safety.
- Speak clearly and with compassion: Never let your efforts prevent your acknowledging the tragedy of an illness, injury or death. People can understand risk information, but they may still not agree with you. Some people will not be satisfied.
- Present scientific information in a way that is easily understood by the public: Work with communication specialists and plan. The goal is for the entire audience to understand the message.
- Sensitise yourself to deliberate disinformation campaigns. Be prepared and respond with the facts.

Factors influencing risk perception

Perceptions of the magnitude of risk are influenced by factors other than numerical data. One of the key objectives of risk communication is to manage perceptions between the water supplier and its users. Risks perceived to be voluntary are more acceptable than risks perceived to be imposed.

- Risks perceived to be under an individual's control are more acceptable than risks perceived to be controlled by others.
- Risks perceived to have clear benefits are more acceptable than risks perceived to have little or no benefit.
- Risks perceived to be fairly distributed are more acceptable than risks perceived to be unfairly distributed.
- Risks perceived to be natural are more acceptable than risks perceived to be man-made.
- Risks perceived to be measurable are more acceptable than risks perceived to be catastrophic.
- Risks perceived to be generated by a trusted source are more acceptable than risks perceived to be generated by an untrusted source.
- Risks perceived to be familiar are more acceptable than risks perceived to be unknown.
- Risks perceived to affect adults are more acceptable than risks perceived to affect children.

Interacting with the community

- Water service providers must recognise the importance of community input and involvement.

Community involvement is important because:

- People are entitled to make decisions about issues that affect their lives.
- Input from the community can assist water service providers to make better decisions.
- Involvement in the process leads to better understanding of, and more appropriate reaction to, a particular risk.
- Those who are affected by a problem bring different variables to the problem-solving equation.
- Cooperation increases credibility.
- Conflict that erodes public confidence and water service providers' resources are more likely to occur when community input isn't invited.

Rural communities:

The needs of rural communities need to be addressed, especially in South Africa with its many diversities. Issues such as gender, language, topic sensitivities, facial expressions, etc. can play a critical role in the success of a communication campaign. Consider the following:

- Identify key representatives (i.e. community leaders, tribal chiefs, or traditional healers) in the community and develop a communication plan with these representatives and their constituents.
- Select appropriate communicators for specific audiences.
- If appropriate, use creative mechanisms to communicate, such as pictorial messages for the illiterate, educational theatre, metaphorical speech, storytelling and role play.
- Make sure to use appropriate idioms (for example, in some areas 'ears of the hippo' can be more appropriate than 'tip of the iceberg').

Make use of Multi-Purpose Community Centre (MPCCs)

1. MPCCs are an initiative of the SA Government's National Communications and Information System (GCIS).

Information on MPCCs can be found at http://www.gcis.gov.za/mpcc/MPCCs are one-stop centres where local, provincial and national government, as well as other service-providers, offer services and information about government programmes to local communities.

MPCCs have access to technology through Information Technology Centres (ITCs) or Tele-centres and Public Information Terminals (PITs).

Eventually each district and metropolitan municipality will have at least one MPCC.

2. MPCCs have been identified as the primary vehicle for the implementation of development communication and information programmes in rural communities and townships. The aim is for communities to access services and engage in government programmes (including provincial and local) for their own empowerment. Services at these Centres can include access to the Internet and other online services; 2-way communication point between government and citizens; venue for community events, public meetings, workshops, forums and discussions; library and health information.

3. MPCCs are located in townships and rural areas (Contact GCIS for more information).

Involve the community in the decision-making process:

- Involve the community at the earliest stage possible.
- Clarify the community's role from the outset.
- Acknowledge situations in which the local government or municipality can permit the community only limited power in decision-making.
- Find out from the communities what type of involvement they prefer.

Identify and respond to the needs of different groups:

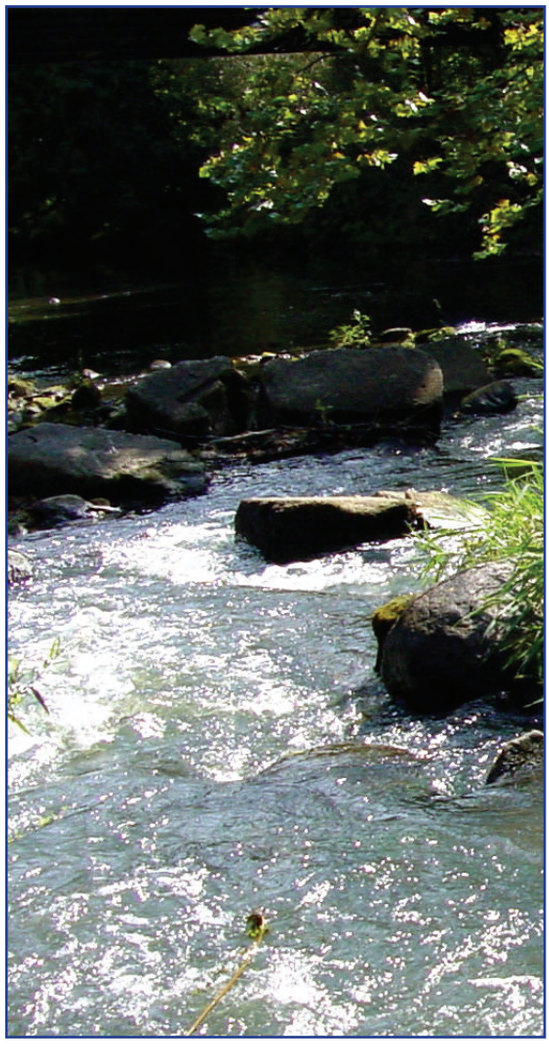
- Try to identify the various interests in a situation right at the beginning and meet with representatives of each group informally.
- Recognize the strengths and weaknesses of public advisory groups.
- Deal with everybody equally and fairly.
- Be sensitive to cultural differences and language barriers.

When appropriate, develop alternatives to public hearings. In particular, hold smaller, more informal meetings:

- If you cannot avoid a large public meeting, the logistics should enable both the agency and the community to be treated fairly.
- Consider breaking larger groups into smaller ones.
- Be clear about the goals for the meeting. If you cannot adequately fulfil a request from the community for a meeting, propose alternatives.
- In certain situations, one-to-one communication may work best.

Recognize that people's values and feelings area legitimate aspect of water quality issues and that such concerns may convey valuable information:

- Provide a forum for people to air their feelings.
- Listen to people when they express their values and feelings.
- Acknowledge people's feelings about issues.
- When people are speaking emotionally, respond to their emotions. Do not merely answer/respond with data.
- Show respect by developing a system that responds promptly to calls from community residents.
- Recognise and be honest about the values incorporated in a water supplier's decisions.
- Be aware of your own values and feelings about an issue and how they affect you.



Communication channels

Achieving effective communication with your target audience depends on selecting methods of communication that will reach them. consider your message and your target audience in selecting the most appropriate communication media. The recommended communication methods for various groups are as follows:

Co-workers:

- New releases and fact sheets
- Site tours
- Meetings to address questions and concerns
- Hotlines
- Articles in organisational newsletters

Area residents:

- Community meetings
- Newspaper articles and advertisements
- Radio and TV talk shows
- Pamphlets
- Films, videos, and other material at libraries
- Direct mail shots
- Involving and informing public libraries

Elected officials, opinion leaders and environmental activists:

- Frequent telephone calls
- Fact sheets
- Personal visits
- Invitation to community meetings
- News releases
- Advance notices

Media:

- News releases that focus on your message
- Clear, informative fact sheets
- Site visits
- News conferences

Earning trust and building credibility

Your ability to establish constructive communication will be determined by whether your audience perceives you to be trustworthy and credible. Consider how they form their judgment and perceptions.

Factors used in assessing trust and credibility:

- Empathy and caring
- Competence and expertise
- Honesty and openness
- Dedication and comment

Trust and credibility are difficult to achieve; if lost, they are almost impossible to regain.

Assessing your effectiveness

In designing your communication programme, establish measurable objectives. For each component, determine what went well, what could have been better, and why.

For each portion of the programme, ask the following questions:

- Were the objectives met?
- Were the changes that followed the result of your programme?
- What went well and why?
- What could have gone better and why?
- How can the programme be improved?
- What lessons were learnt?
- With whom should the lessons be shared?

Principles of risk communication

Know your audience:

In formulating the risk communication messages, the audience should be analyzed in order to understand their opinions and motivations. Get to know them as a group and as individuals to understand their concerns and feelings and to maintain open communication channels.

Involve the scientific experts

Scientific experts, in their capacity as risk assessors, need to be able to explain the results of their assessment and the scientific data, assumptions and subjective judgments upon which the assessment is based, so that interested parties can clearly understand the risk. In addition, they must be able to clearly communicate what they know and what they don't know, and to explain the uncertainties related to the risk assessment process. In turn, it is important for the risk managers to explain how the risk management decisions were arrived at.

Establish expertise in communication

Successful risk communication requires expertise in conveying understandable and usable information to all interested parties. Risk communication officials should be identified and should be trained. Complex risk communication includes tasks such as responding to the needs of the various audiences (public, media, industry, etc.) and preparing effective messages.
People with expertise in risk communication should therefore be involved as early as possible.
This expertise will most probably have to be developed by training and experience.

Be a credible source of information

Information from credible sources is more likely to positively influence the public perception of a risk than information from sources that lack this attribute. The credibility accorded a source may vary according to the nature of the hazard and the culture and social and economic status of the community.

If consistent messages are received from multiple sources then the credibility of the message is reinforced. Factors determining source credibility include:

- Recognized competence or expertise
- Trustworthiness
- Fairness, and
- Lack of bias

Terms that consumers associate with high credibility include: factual, knowledgeable, expert, public welfare, responsible, truthful and record of accomplishment.

Trust and credibility can also be eroded or lost through ineffective or inappropriate communication. Consumers have indicated in studies that distrust and low credibility result from exaggeration, distortion and perceived vested interest.

Effective communication messages acknowledge current issues and problems, are open in their content and approach, and are timely. Timeliness of the message is most important, since most controversies become focused on the question, "Why didn't you tell us sooner?", rather than on the risk itself. Omissions, distortions and self-serving statements will damage credibility in the long term.

Shared responsibility:

Water service providers at local, provincial and national government level all have a fundamental responsibility for risk communication. The public expects the government to play a leading role in risk communication. Government needs to know what the public knows about the possible risks and what the public thinks of the various options being considered. Even if the government decides that no action is necessary, communication is still essential to provide reasons for the lack of action.

The media also constitute a party that needs to share responsibility in the communication process, especially if the concern involves immediate risks related to a water quality issue that adversely affects human health (e.g. cholera outbreak).

Industry also has a responsibility for risk communication, especially when the risk results from the effect of their products or processes on the quality of water (factories, mines, farming practices, etc.).

All parties involved share a responsibility for the outcome of a certain communication even though their individual roles may differ. Since the basis for decision-making may be scientific, all parties involved in the communication process should be informed of the basic principles and data supporting the risk assessment and the policies underlying the resulting risk management decisions.

Differentiate between science and value judgment:

It is essential to separate facts from values in considering risk management options. At a practical level, it is useful to report the facts that are known at the time as well as what uncertainties are involved in the risk management decisions being proposed or implemented. The risk communicator bears the responsibility of explaining what is known as fact and where the limits of this knowledge begin and end. Value judgments are involved in the concept of acceptable levels of risk.
Consequently, risk communicators should be able to justify the level of acceptable risk to the public.
Many people take the term “safe water” to mean water with no risks involved. However, this is often unattainable. In practice, “safe water” usually means water that is “safe enough”. Making this clear is an important function of risk communication.

Assure transparency:

For the public to accept the risk analysis process and its outcomes, the process must be transparent. While respecting legitimate concerns to preserve confidentiality (e.g. proprietary information or data), transparency in risk analysis necessitates conducting the process so that it is open and available for scrutiny by interested parties. Effective two-way communication between risk managers, the public and interested parties is both an essential part of risk management and a key to achieving transparency.

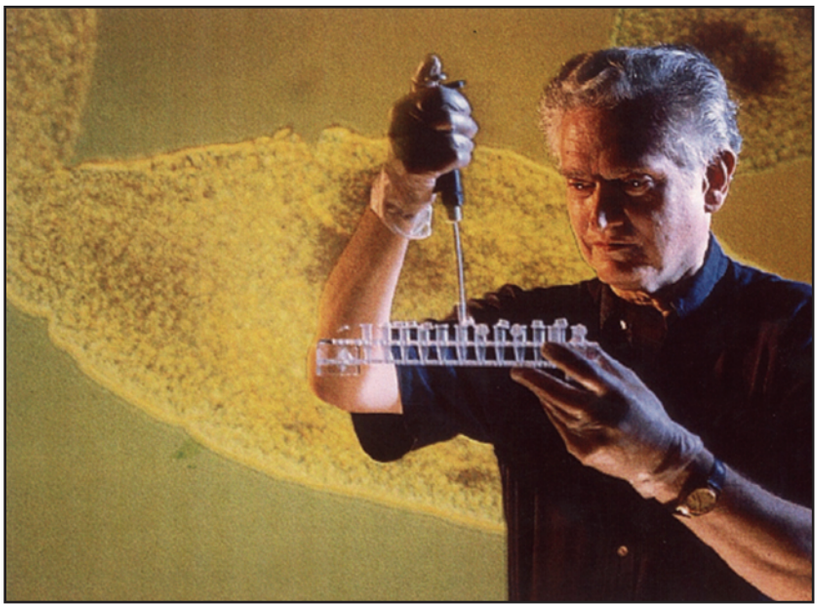
Put the risk in perspective:

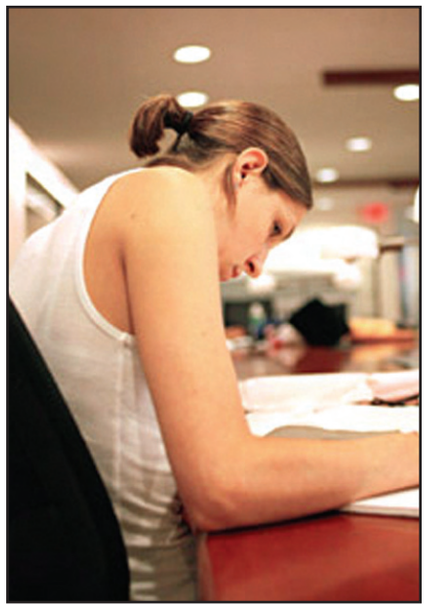
One way to put a risk in perspective is to examine it in the context of the benefits associated with the technology or process that poses the risk. Another approach that may be helpful is to compare the risk with other similar, more familiar risks. However, the latter approach can create problems if it appears the risk comparisons have been intentionally chosen to make the risk at issue seem more acceptable to the public. In general, risk comparisons should not be used unless:

- all risk estimates are equally sound;
- all risk estimates are relevant to the specific audience;
- the degree of uncertainly in all risk estimates is similar;
- the degree of uncertainty in all risk estimates is similar;
- the concerns of the audience are acknowledged and addressed; and
- the substances, products or activities themselves are directly comparable, including the concept of voluntary and involuntary exposure.

PART 2

Barriers to effective risk communication





Effective communication about water quality health risks is more than just an understanding of the risks in the context of the risk assessment and risk management processes. Barriers to risk communication exist and recognising those barriers and knowing how to overcome them are essential for effective risk communication.

Access to information

Communication plays a vital role throughout the risk analysis process to assure that risk management strategies effectively minimise water quality health risks to the public. Many communication steps in this process constitute internal communication. Steps like hazard identification and selection of risk management options require communication with all interested parties to help improve the transparency of decisions and increase the potential level of acceptance of the outcomes.

Vital information is often withheld because of a need to protect competitive industry position or for other business reasons. On the other hand, government may be unwilling to openly discuss facts they possess about water quality risks for a variety of reasons.

Complete access to all relevant data about a water quality health risk may not exist in all situations. Lack of access to critical data about a risk makes the communication steps involved in hazard identification and risk management even more difficult.

Participation in the process

Lack of participation in the risk analysis process by those parties having a significant interest in the outcome can be an important barrier to effective communication about the water quality health risks.

Broad participation improves risk communication by presenting opportunities to identify and address the concerns of interested parties when decisions are made. It increases the overall understanding of the process and the decisions, and makes it easier to communicate later with the public about those decisions. Those who were involved in the decision-making process are less likely to challenge the outcome, especially if their concerns have been addressed. Some reasons for non-participation are external to the process itself, for example, the role of water quality specialists and the lack of resources.

Specialists should be identified and trained in order to actively participate in the risk management process at local and national levels.

Differences in perceptions

Individuals can perceive the risk from the same hazard very differently. Some members of the public may disagree with risk assessors and managers regarding important hazard characteristics, the relative magnitude of the severity of the risk associated with those hazards, the priority of risks, and other issues. Other segments of the public may not pay attention to risk information if the message does not address their actual concerns, but instead addresses only risk assessment provided by the experts. The effectiveness of risk communication can be enhanced by efforts to establish dialogues with interested parties and the public through open meetings, focus groups, surveys and other methods. The goal of these efforts should be to gain an understanding of how the public and other interested parties perceive the risk.

Difference in receptivity

Many individuals believe they are less at risk from a given hazard than other people are, and perceive that risk messages concerning water quality issues are directed towards other people. Some people also tend to believe that they are more knowledgeable than the average member of society and will thus ignore water quality risk issues they believe are directed towards less informed people. To communicate effectively with these unreceptive groups, it is important to understand their attitudes, beliefs and concerns, and to address those concerns in risk communication messages.

Lack of understanding of the scientific process

Scientific terminology may obscure the meaning of facts for the public. If messages are not expressed in terms comprehensible to those affected by the risk, they may be misunderstood. Unless scientific uncertainties are acknowledged and put into context, the public may not gain an accurate perception of what is and is not known about the risk.

In addition, unless value judgments that are necessary components of risk assessment and risk management decisions are explicitly stated, the public may not grasp the basis for decisions that are made. Public attitudes, once formed, are difficult to change, as people tend to select information that supports already held beliefs. To overcome these barriers, risk communicators should use non-technical terms to the greatest extent possible, and explain the technical terms that are used. Non-technical people should also review proposed messages for clarity and comprehensibility.

Source credibility

The public does not trust equally all sources of information about water quality issues. Where different risk messages are received from different sources, the public will respond to the message from the more credible source.

Factors that enhance trust and credibility include public perceptions of the communicator's accuracy, knowledge, concern for public welfare and proven track record. Distrust is associated with perceptions of bias or with failure by the communicator to provide accurate information in the past.
Trust is more important under conditions of great uncertainty or when the public believes that accurate estimates of risks are unavailable. Trust also depends on the extent to which the risk assessment and risk management processes are believed to be transparent and open to public scrutiny. Once lost, trust is not easily regained. Communication is most effective hen all sources, including those trusted most by the public, convey similar messages about the risk.

Diversity (societal characteristics)

Some barriers to risk communication are not only associated with attributes of the senders and receivers of risk information, but with the nature of the society in which the communication occurs. Factors that can make risk communication more difficult include language differences, cultural factors, religion, illiteracy, poverty, lack of legal resources, the role of women in society and a lack of infrastructure that supports communications. These barriers are even more severe when they are compounded by differences in socio-economic status of the target groups. Other barriers include geographical obstacles or groups of people who are physically inaccessible to risk communicators. In addition, free exchange of information may be limited by political constraints.

Cultural and social attributes need to be identified and addressed for two reasons: to prevent them from hampering risk communication, and to enhance the process of designing messages for target audiences.

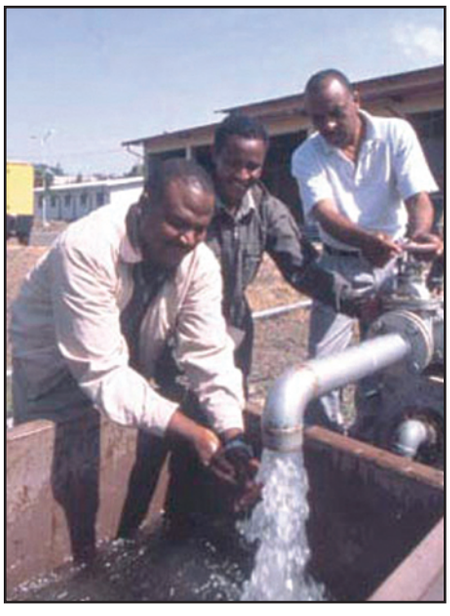
Media

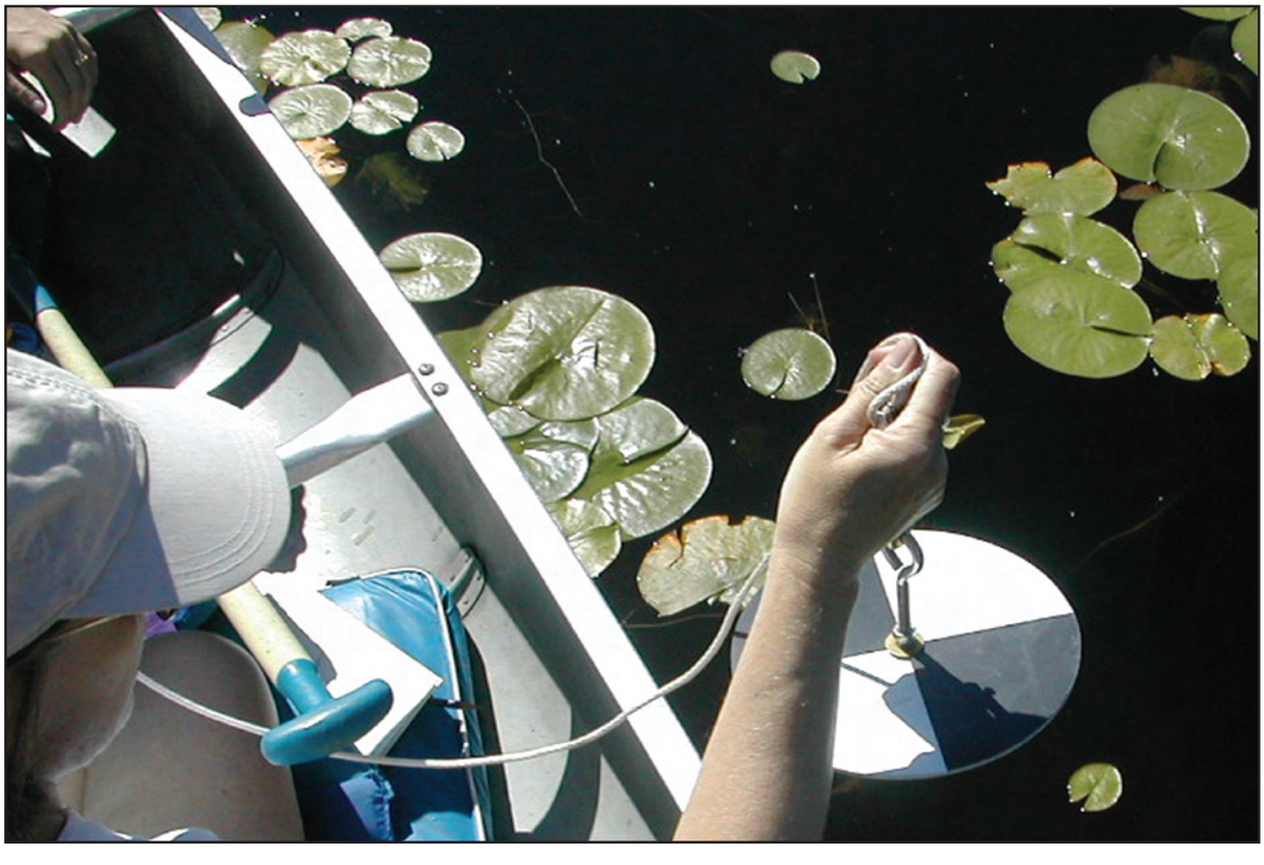
The public generally obtains its information about health risks associated with water from the media. Sometimes the media do not accurately convey risk information. It is sometimes difficult for the media to prepare stories on highly technical matters as few reporters have experience of complex scientific and policy issues regarding water quality and health. The media also have their own agenda and make their own judgments on what is newsworthy. It often appears to risk managers, technical experts and scientists that the news media focus unduly on conflict and controversy, and occasionally they sensationalise or exaggerate risks in order to draw attention to a story. While problems with media coverage of food-related risks are by no means universal, when they do occur they can make communication about food risk more difficult.

Risk communicators are often not familiar enough with the media to understand how to work with reporters to ensure the quality and accuracy of media reports. It is imperative that risk communicators need to undergo training in media skills and should work to establish long-term relationships with members of the media. In planning for, or responding to, emergencies, it is essential to include a person responsible for the media in any crisis response team. In situations where certain essential information is not considered newsworthy by the media and is therefore not disseminated by them, the authorities can still convey the information to public by considering the use of paid advertisements.

PART 3

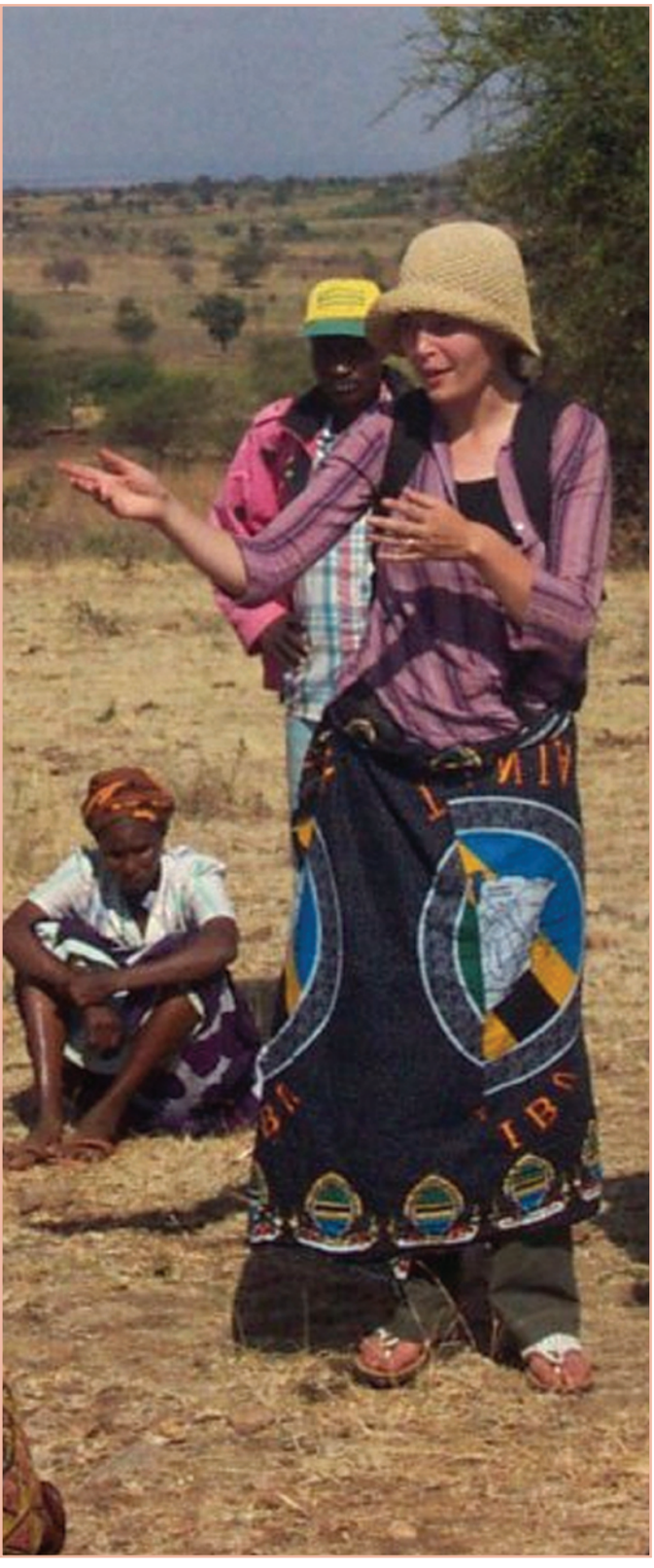
Strategies for effective risk communication





Different risk communication strategies are appropriate since risk communication occurs in different contexts. Although such strategies share many similarities, the strategies needed during an emergency differ from the strategy needed to engage the public in dialogue about the risks and benefits of new water technologies, and from strategies for communicating less important issues about water health.

General considerations for effective risk communication



Background/Information:

- Understand the scientific bases of the risks and attendant uncertainties.
- Understand the public perception of the risk through such means as risk surveys, interviews and focus groups.
- Find out what information the public wants to know.
- Be sensitive to related issues that may be more important to people than the risk itself.
- Expect different perceptions of the risks.
- Understand the community and target audience. Ensure that issues such as gender, language and topic sensitivities are handled appropriately. (Also see Section 2: Issues and Principles; Interacting with the community).

Preparation/ Assembly:

- Avoid comparisons between familiar risks and new risks, as they may not seem genuine unless properly presented.
- Recognise and respond to the emotional aspects of risk perceptions. Speak with sympathy and never use logic alone to convince an audience that is reacting with emotion.
- Explain the uncertainty factors that are used in risk assessment and standard setting.
- Maintain an openness, flexibility and recognition of your responsibilities to the public in all communication activities.
- Build an awareness of benefits associated with risk.

Dissemination/Distribution:

- Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner by describing risk/benefit information and control measures in an understandable way.
- Share the public's concern rather than deny it as not legitimate or as unimportant. Be prepared to give as much emphasis to people's concerns as to the risk statistics.
- Be honest, frank and open in discussing all issues.
- If explaining statistics derived from risk assessment, explain the risk assessment process before presenting the numbers.
- Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources.
- Meet the needs of the media.

Review/Evaluation:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of risk messages and communication channels.
- Emphasise actions to monitor, manage and reduce risk.
- Plan carefully and evaluate efforts.

Strategies for risk communication in a non-crisis situation:

- Risk communication is also important where there is no immediate crisis. In such situations, risk communication should be used for educational purposes and awareness. An example is the delivery of important information to specific target groups, such as pregnant women and the elderly. Also refer to Volume 5 in this series, What we and our children need to know - Health and Hygiene Awareness.

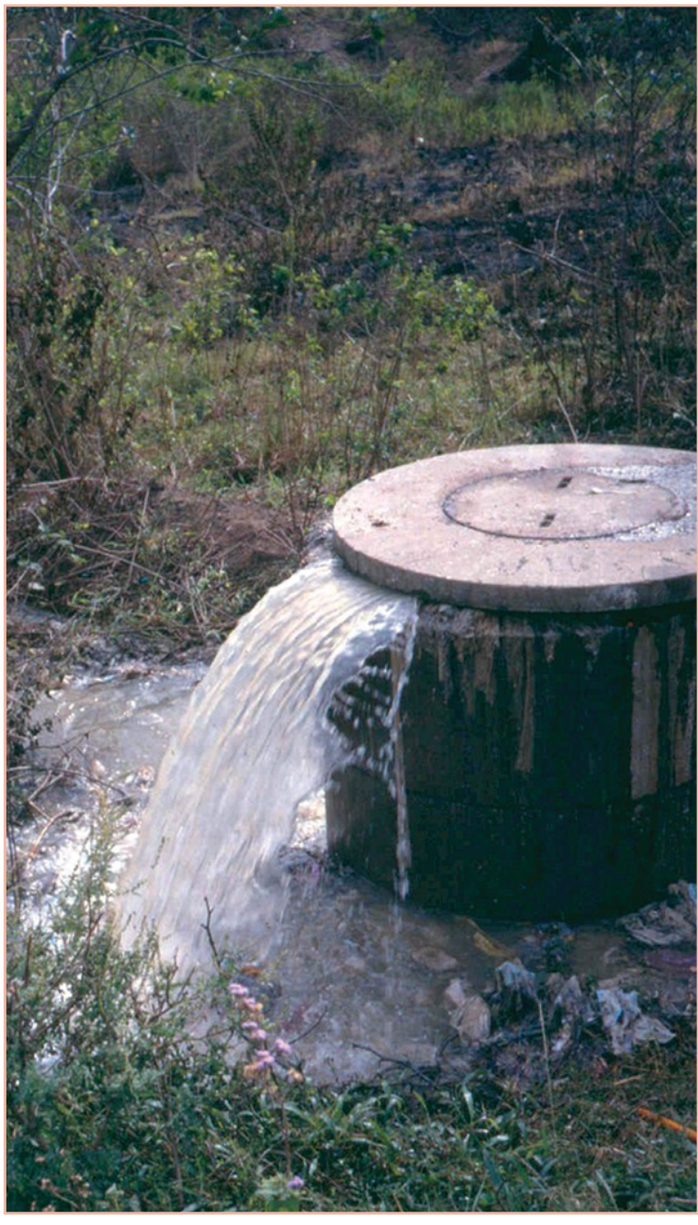
- In addition, risk communication in a non-crisis situation is important where routine risk analyses are being made to identify hazards. In such situations, the following should be considered:

Background/Information:

- Anticipate emerging public health hazards before they become significant.
- Determine the public's perception of the hazard being considered and their knowledge and behaviour regarding the risks involved.
- Analyse the target audience of a risk communication message and understand their beliefs and attitudes. Try to determine the full range of the audience's concerns and the perceived importance of those concerns.
- Analyse which information channels and messages are best suited to be used. Use the mass media and other appropriate channels to convey information.

Preparation/Assembly:

- Explain to concerned groups how risk is determined, how it can be monitored and how an individual can control or reduce a risk.
- Identify shared values and help individuals identify an approach that meets their values.
- Make messages interesting and relevant by emphasising the human rather that the statistical aspects of a story.
- Make messages interesting enough for the media to publish. Claims of risks are usually considered by the media to be more newsworthy than claims of safety.



Dissemination/Distribution:

- Use the mass media where possible to address identified consumer concerns, e.g., public forums with local opinion leaders can be televised. Community media (including radio stations) can also play a vital role.
- Sustain communication, thus enabling the public to make decisions based upon personal values and goals and to gain a greater understanding of the potential risks and benefits involved.
- Make risk communication a two-way process, not just communication from technical experts to the public, but also vice versa.
- Use public participation to sustain efforts.
- Use health education and access to health information to foster effective participation of people and communities.

Review/Evaluation:

- Add an evaluation to any risk communication strategy.
- Test the clarity and comprehensibility of the message with a representative segment of the target audience.
- Integrate risk communication with risk assessment and risk management activities to increase the effectiveness of risk control and ensure proper utilisation of resources.
- Educate and train risk assessors and risk managers in the principles and uses of risk communication.
- Effective risk communication can break through traditional boundaries within government sectors, between government and non-government organisations, and between the public and private sectors. Cooperation is essential and this requires the creation of equal partnerships between the different sectors in society at all levels of governance.

Strategies for risk communication during a water quality health crisis

(Also see Part 5: The role of the media)

While the general strategies for non-crisis situations referred to previously still apply, a crisis calls for special considerations. Communication strategies should be an integral part of the crisis management plan. Effective crisis management requires a comprehensive plan that can be updated through periodic evaluations. Maintaining effective channels of communication to the public during a crisis is extremely important: first, to prevent panic, and second, to provide positive information on the situation that assists in deciding what course of action should be taken.

- Communicating to the public should include information on:
- the nature and extent of the crisis and the measures taken to control it;
- the sources of contaminated water and what to do with water in the home;
- how to prevent the spread of the problem; and
- safe water handling practices by the public.

To achieve these objectives, the risk communicator may:

- Manage a series of media communications
- Establish appropriate mechanisms to deliver information, e.g. local visits, radio announcements, a toll-free telephone helpline, etc.
- Arrange for one-to-one advice in clinics, if a waterborne disease is involved
- Provide daily updates on the crisis and crisis management activities to all healthcare and other relevant professionals
- Hold regular briefings for water service providers, the media and representatives of communities and the public; involve the media
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the crisis communication and make adjustments as appropriate

Parties that are responsible for managing a water quality crisis should establish a network for interactively sharing information. National and local government departments, hospitals and private enterprises should make information accessible to one other in an accurate, concise and usable form.

International response:

Early warning systems in regions (or countries) should be established to enable rapid communication of an emerging crisis. Once the cause of a water disease outbreak has been established, action can be taken across international borders. (For example, a cholera outbreak may need to be managed across international boundaries.) Protocols exist for emergency responses across borders with neighbouring states. Government Departments should be contacted.

National response:

National government needs to be prepared to rapidly disseminate accurate information to the mass media and public when a water quality crisis arises. Essential steps in preparing for such a crisis include:

- Identifying reliable sources of information and expert advice.
- Arranging an administrative organisation to handle communication during a crisis.
- Developing staff skills in dealing with the media and the public.
- Identifying and notifying the appropriate Catchment Management Agency.

Local response:

The first line of contact in a crisis is usually the local water service providers and officials. It is critical that they quickly communicate conditions to the appropriate authority that a crisis can be contained and appropriately managed.

- Provide complete, up-to-date and accurate information. When the situation is resolved, tell the public that "it is over".
- Keep your message simple, too many facts are overwhelming. If appropriate, use videotape or other communication means to emphasise your message.
- Choose a media-trained spokesperson. During a crisis, water users should know who is responsible for information and updates. Ensure that the trained spokesperson is accessible to the media at all times.

Industry response:

When a crisis has emerged or is emerging, industry should ensure that the public authorities are fully informed about the cause and potential extent of the problem, and the anticipated effectiveness of the water quality risk action plan. In dealing with the public during a water crisis, company actions and communications should reflect that the water users' safety comes first. The following policies and actions have proven to be effective:

- Assess the problem as if you were the water user. Take responsibility for finding a solution to the problem and protecting and advising water users by informing the public of the facts in a clear and reasonable way. This will demonstrate trustworthiness.

- All company pronouncements should be from a single unified source. Have one spokesperson. Conflicting messages only confuse the issues, erode confidence and disrupt the process of crisis resolution.

- Choose a spokesperson trained and skilled in dealing with the media. The spokesperson should be accessible to the media at all times. (See Section 6: The role of the media.)

- Spokespersons should consider the public, and not just the industry. Companies can appear to be concerned only with profits and losses, whereas an effective spokesperson would express concern for people and their needs.

- Have an open-door policy regarding communication with the media. Communication messages should be consistent and updated as soon as new information is received.

- Communicate quickly and often. Work with the media, using the tools and timetables that work best for them.

- Keep company employees informed, especially those in positions that have regular contact with water users. Tell them what is being done to resolve the problem and what risk messages are being communicated.

- Establish a mechanism for developing feedback from water users. This can be done through toll-free telephone numbers and survey polls.

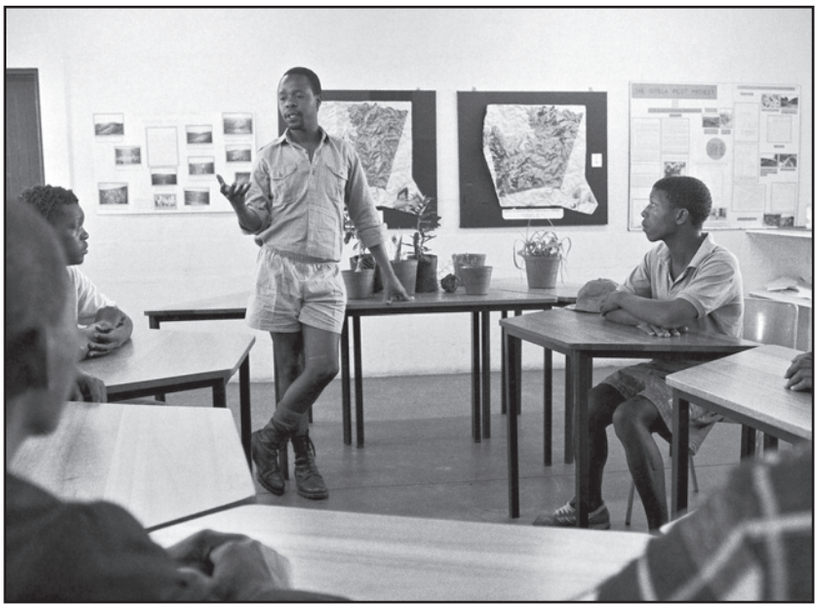
- Be familiar with the water service providers' objectives and how they can be used to formulate risk communication messages.

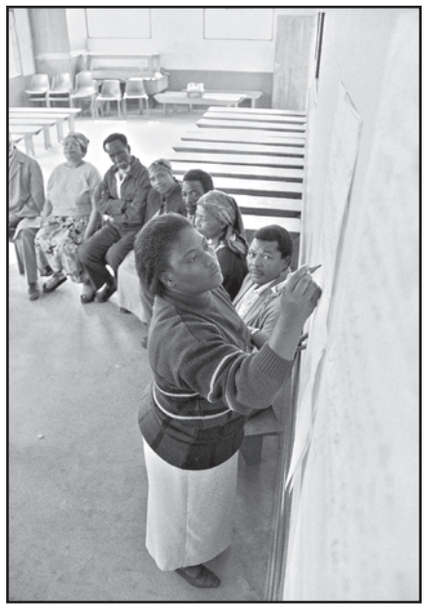
Evaluation of communication activities:

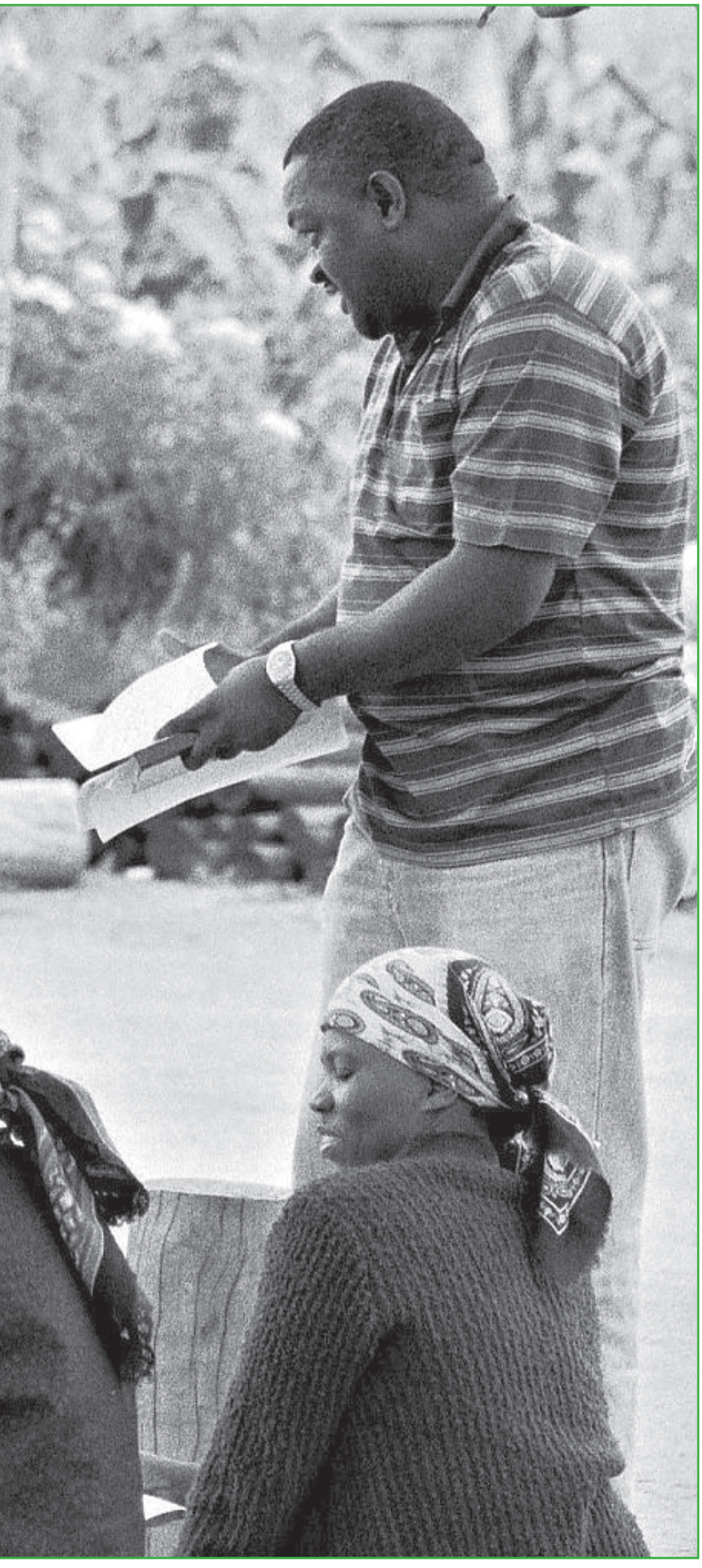
Risk communication efforts and programmes need to be evaluated both regularly and systematically to determine their effectiveness and to modify where needed. Communication aims and objectives need to be clearly stated if an evaluation is to be effective. Such aims and objectives could include the proportion of the "at-risk" public to be reached, the adoption of appropriate risk reduction practices, and the extent of the resolution of the crisis. It is important to draw lessons from both positive and negative risk communication experiences, in order to adjust and improve ongoing communication activities. Only through systematic evaluations, which are performed throughout the communication process, can that process be strengthened.

PART 4

Presenting and preparing information for public meetings







What you do and how you do it will affect your audiences' perception of you, your organisation (i.e. water supplier), and the information you are providing. Prepare and present effectively.

Before the meeting:

Invite your audience

- Depending on the nature of the risk or the community, any one (or all) of the following channels can be used: posters and fliers at libraries and community centres; inform focus groups and community leaders; and issue media statements to local community radio stations, TV and newspapers.
  Invite as many people as possible to establish good faith.
- Compile a list of core group people who should always be invited. For example:
  health inspectors, representatives of the Departments of Health, Water Affairs and Environment.
- Allow for sufficient notice time. In a crisis situation this will not be possible though.

Know your audiences

- Anticipate interests, concerns and questions.
- Identify an appropriate and credible spokesperson to match the audience and message.
- Prepare for a media presence (see Section 6: The role of the media).
- Consider these/the above in preparation.

Prepare your presentation

- Develop an approach in line with the type of meeting
  (rural or urban; formal or informal; venue and audience).
- Develop a strong introduction.
- Develop a maximum of three key messages.
- Assemble your supporting data.
- Prepare audiovisual aids.
- Practise

Prepare to answer questions

- Anticipate what questions will arise and prepare answers to them.
- Practise questioning and responding.

The opening presentation:

A strong opening presentation sets the tone for the meeting and is crucial in attempting to establish trust and build credibility. Its elements include the following:

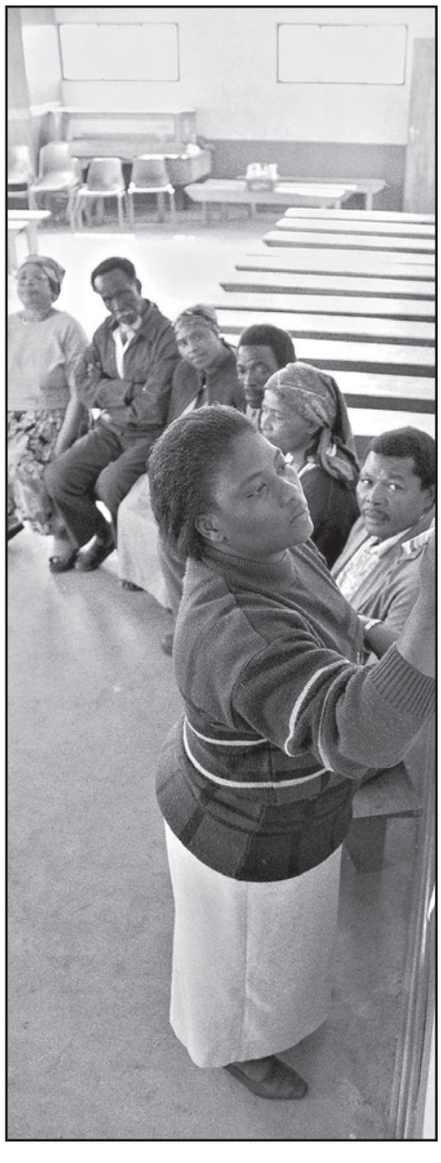
Introduction

Remember that perceived empathy is a vital factor in establishing trust and building credibility, and such empathy is assessed by your audience in the first 30 seconds. Include the following in your introduction:

- A statement of personal concern, e.g., "I can see by the number of people here tonight that you are as concerned about this issue as I am".

- A statement of organisational commitment and intent, e.g., "I am committed to protecting the environment and the public. We at the Municipality (example) have been involved with this community for a long time and want to work with the community on this issue".

- A statement of purpose and plan for the meeting (do not use the same statement at each meeting), e.g., "Tonight, we would like to spend approximately 15 minutes sharing the findings of the report with you, then we would like to open the floor for discussion, questions and concerns. We will be available after the meeting for anyone who wants additional information or would like to continue the discussion".



Key messages

The key messages regarding points that you want your public to have in mind after the meeting. These messages should address central issues and be short and concise, e.g., "We have extensively tested wells in the area and found that the water quality meets all standards for safe drinking".To develop your key messages:

Brainstorm. Think freely and write down all pieces of information you wish to communicate. A maximum of three take-home points should be considered by identifying the most important ideas.

Identify supporting information to validate/substantiate the key messages.

Conclusion

- A summarising statement that restates verbatim your key messages. Add a future action statement about what your organisation is still going to do on this project in the short and long term.

Presentation aids:

Audiovisual aids can make your messages easier to understand. People are more likely to remember a point if they have a visual association with the words. Examples of presentation aids:

- Charts
- Illustrations
- Diagrams
- Glossaries
- Maps
- Video or motion pictures
- 35-mm slides
- Site visits
- Posters
- Photographs
- Concrete examples of scientific concepts
- Handouts
- Websites
- Computer presentation with data projector

Planning and preparation:

Factors to consider: room size, seating arrangements, visual obstacles, lighting, and electrical outlets.

Things to do:

- Determine whether electricity will be available at the venue.
- Set up, focus and arrange equipment beforehand.
- Designate someone to help with lights.
- Leave equipment intact until audience leaves.

Tool kit: Spare bulbs; 3-pronged adapter; extension cord; duct tape; staff phone numbers; blank transparencies; slide tray; markers/chalk; back-up notes.

Design guidelines:

Effective visual aids:

- Are able to stand alone.
- Illustrate a key concept.
- Support only one major idea.
- Use pictures or graphics rather than words whenever possible.

- Are limited to a maximum of six words per line maximum and ten lines per visual.
- Feature short phrases or key words.
- Highlight an important point with colour or contrasts.
- Represent facts accurately.
- Are neat, tidy, clear and uncluttered.
- Have impact.
- Can be viewed from a distance.

Presentation reminders:

When planning, practising and conducting a presentation, consider these facets of verbal and nonverbal communication:

Volume: The intensity of your voice reflects your confidence, competence and openness. Watch your audience for feedback. Adjust to your surroundings.

Enunciation / pronunciation: Speak distinctly and correctly. Be careful with unfamiliar words. Spell and define terms as appropriate.

Pace / rhythm / pitch: Vary your tempo. Speak slowly to emphasize key messages, pause for emphasis, and vary your voice pattern and length of phrases. Avoid repeating words such as “ok”, “like”, “not” and “uh”.

Facial expression / eye contact: Eye contact is most crucial. Your mouth, eyes, forehead and eyebrows also communicate. Sensitise yourself to the use of eye contact in different cultures.

Posture: Posture and body language communicate attitude. Try to keep an upright stance with legs slightly apart.

Gestures: Gestures can enhance or detract from your communication. Be aware of your gestures and make sure they are appropriate.

Dress / grooming: Dress as your audience would expect you to at your place of work or perhaps slightly less formally. In rural settings a less formal style may be more appropriate.

Distractions: Avoid repetitive gestures such as constant throat clearing, checking your watch, juggling keys and pacing.

A presentation planner:	
Project	
Time	
Place	
Date	
Public • Names • Concerns	
Introduction • Statement of personal concern • Statement of organisational commitment • Purpose and plan of the meeting	
Key messages • Content • Supporting data	
Conclusion • Summary statement	
Questions & Answers • Audiovisuals • Handouts	
Other important issues. Ensure that you - 1. Are not unprepared 2. Handle questions properly 3. Do not apologise for yourself or your organisation 4. Know obvious information 5. Use audiovisual aids professionally 6. Involve participants 7. Establish rapport 8. Are organised 9. For record purposes, keep an attendance register	

Answering questions:

As with presentations, your responses to individuals' questions and concerns will affect your success. Prepare and practise. Consider how to answer questions in general and how to respond to specific enquiries.

Guidelines:

Be prepared. If you know your subject and know your audience, most questions can be anticipated. Develop and practise responses.
Track your key messages. Use your reponses as opportunities to reemphasise your key messages.

Keep your answers short and focused. Your answers should be less than 2 minutes long.

Practise self-management. Listen. Be confident and factual. Control your emotions.

Speak and act with integrity. Tel the truth. If you don't know, say so. Follow up as promised. If a question is not clear, repeat or paraphrase it to be certain of the meaning.

Sample questions:

The following questions illustrate what you are likely to encounter, along with suggested key messages and tips for responding to them.

Question	Key Message	Action
You are here representing The Water Board of X. Why doesn't the Water Board have a programme to investigate potential problem areas of water contamination?	We do have a policy, In fact, we...	• State in a positive manner that you do not agree with the questioner's statement. Do not try to ignore it. • Be polite but firm • Take the opportunity to restate your position or message
Your boss said that he was confident that no problems would be found at this location. Doesn't he know that bad sanitation practices cause serious water pollution and health risks?	Evaluating sanitation practices is part of the overall investigation that we are conducting to ensure the continued safety of the public.	• Do not repeat the negative words • Return to your message
You told us about the Municipality's position on water quality. But would you drink the water?	I am also concerned about the quality of the drinking water - not only as a representative of the Municipality but also as a fellow citizen. Given all I know about the issue and given the type of person I am, yes, I would drink the water.	• Be prepared for personal questions • If you do not agree with the Municipality's position, you should not act as a spokesperson.
Do you know the exact figure of how much money has been spent on this problem?	I don't know the exact figure, but if you will give me your name and number, I will get that information to you by...	• Say you don't know • Offer to get the information by a specified time • Don't lie or make up answers • If you promise to get the information, follow up
What are your qualifications to run this programme?	I have several years' experience in managing programmes of this type, and I have a team of professionals working with me to ensure that all aspects of the programme are carried out with stringent regard to quality.	• Don't respond with emotion or hostility • Remove emotional words

Question	Key Message	Action
It must be hard to deal with all your environmental problems.	My training and experience have prepared me to deal with environmental safety and health problems. And I am here to do the best job I can for the community.	• Don't buy into the sympathetic approach. You may end up agreeing and destroying your credibility.
With reference to groundwater contamination, why do you think your agency doesn't care about the health of its neighbours?	We are very much concerned about the health of our neighbours.	• Be polite but firm • Return to your message • Repeat your statement
Then why did it take govern- I want to make sure that it is ment over five years of study clear that we take immediate to come up with a solution to care of any situation that poses remediate your contamination of our groundwater?	An imminent danger without delay. During our study, which for many reasons is an extensive not and expensive process, we did find an immediate health threat. If we had, we would have taken immediate action. Public health is always our top concern.	• Be careful not to repeat negative words like "contamination of the public groundwater".
What is the worst-case scenario?	I would not want to speculate. We are working hard to ensure the health and safety of this community. The study we are conducting will include testing of soil, groundwater, etc.	• Don't speculate • If you do speculate, categorise it as such.
What does a 1 in 10 000 risk mean?	Explain how risk calculations are made based on exposure assumptions. Anyone who has been exposed in the same manner will then have a 1 in 10 000 risk of becoming ill. This can be put into perspective by explaining what our background risks are of for example, developing cancer or acquiring an infection.	• Try to explain that a risk calculation is made based on very specific assumptions, and that risks vary greatly between individuals. • Compare risks to something similar
We have heard a rumour that there is a serious groundwater problem at this site.	This is the first time I have heard this rumour. The data I have seen indicate that no ground- water problems exist at this site.	• Don't respond to rumour. • Do tell the truth

Question	Key Message	Action
What would you recommend that your boss do to address the concerns of the public on these contamination problems?	My boss can request advice and guidance from anyone concerning safe environmental practices. When I'm asked, I provide whatever assistance I can.	• Don't give this kind of advice when talking to the public or media.

The large water boards often have handy information brochures available (for example Rand Waters' Frequently Asked Questions about the Quality of Tap Water)

Some do's and don'ts of listening:

Do:

- Become aware of your own listening habits.
- Share responsibility for the communication.
- Concentrate on what the speaker is saying.
- Listen for the total meaning, including feelings.
- Observe the speakers' non-verbal signals.
- Adopt an accepting attitude.
- Express empathic understanding.
- Listen to yourself.
- "Close the loop" of listening by taking appropriate action.

Don't:

- Mistake not talking for listening.
- Fake listening.
- Interrupt needlessly.
- Pass judgment too quickly.
- Make arguing an "ego-trip"; don't argue.
- Ever tell a speaker: "I know how you feel".
- Overreact to emotional words.
- Give advice unless it is requested.
- Use listening as a way of hiding yourself.

Managing hostile situations:

Issues affecting health and the environment can arouse strong anger and hostility. Consider some strategies to diffuse anger and redirect hostile energy. Remember that hostility is usually directed at you as representative of an organisation, not to you as an individual.

What you can do:

Acknowledge the existence of hostility.

- The worst thing you can do is to pretend it's not there.
- Practise self-management.
- Control your apprehension.
- Anxiety undercuts confidence, concentration and momentum.
- Listen.

Be prepared:

- Plan, prepare and practise your presentation and anticipated questions and answers.
- Communicate empathy and caring.
- Recognise people's frustrations.
- Use eye contact appropriately.
- Assume a listening posture.
- Answer questions carefully and thoughtfully.

Track your messages:

- Turn negatives into positives.
- Bridge back to your messages.

PART 5

The role of the media

Working with the media is one of the primary opportunities for communication with the target public; a positive relationship with the media is crucial. Consider what to do before, during and after an interview.

The players

Good media management is based on a thorough understanding of the various players and elements in the media process - their expectations, perceptions and views of the role of the media.

Players	Expectations & perceptions
Management of water service providers	• See the media as a source of free advertising. Expect to get positive coverage when they want it. • Believe the media have no right to criticise, or express a contrary point of view. • See the media as negative anarchists bent on destroying the establishment.
Players	**Expectations & perceptions**
Media	• See their role as watchdog of society. • Believe it is their responsibility to keep society informed by providing timeous, relevant and objective facts. • Believe that society should know all and decide for itself.
Target audiences	• See the media as a source of credible information about their situation. • Generally tend to believe and be influenced by what they learn through the media.
Journalist	• Has to see all points of view and balance the equation to keep everyone happy.

The media perspective

In general, the media are interested in:

- Human interest stories.
- Bad news rather than good news.
- People's perspectives.
- Yes or no /safe or unsafe answers.
- Front-page news stories.

The spokesperson and preparing a message

The media will be seeking information on:
Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?

Identify spokespersons who match the image of the target audience and who are acceptable and credible for the specific target audience. The spokesperson will need to be trained in:

- Media rights.
- Procedures regarding interviews.
- Right to ask for line of questioning upfront.
- Right to see copy before publication, and what can be changed.
- How to work with specific media (print, TV, radio).
- Handling no comment without saying "no comment".
- Television techniques.

An effective spokesperson must:

- Be a good oral communicator.
- Present material clearly and convincingly.
- Be an expert in his/her fields.
- Be well prepared and concise.
- Be frank, never evasive.
- Never read answers or statements from a sheet of paper.
- Use body language and facial expressions.
- Guard against mannerisms.
- Always look the interviewer in the eye.

What to do before, during and after an interview

BEFORE	
Do	**Don't**
Ask who will be conducting the interview.	Tell the news organisation which reporter you prefer.
Ask which subjects they want to cover.	Ask for specific questions in advance.
Caution them when you are not the correct person to interview because there are topics you cannot discuss (lack of knowledge, etc.).	Demand that your remark not be edited.
Enquire about the format and duration.	Insist that an adversary not be interviewed.
Ask who else will be interviewed.	Assume it will be easy.
Offer to provide background information or a press release.	Ask for exact questions to be posed.
Prepare and practise.	Question or be prescriptive.
Ask for line of questioning.	
DURING	
Do	**Don't**
Be honest and accurate.	Lie or try to cloud the truth.
Stick to your key message.	Emphasise or dwell on negative allegations.
State your conclusion first, then supply supporting data.	Raise issues you don't want to see in the story.
Be forthcoming.	Fail to think the question / topic through ahead of time.
Offer to get information you don't have.	Guess.
Explain the subject and content.	Use jargon or assume that facts speak for themselves.
Stress the facts.	Speculate or discuss hypothetical situations.
Give a reason if you cannot discuss a subject.	Say "No comment".
Correct mistakes by stating that you would like an opportunity to clarify.	Demand that an answer not be used.

BEFORE	
Do	**Don't**
Remember you are still on the record.	Assume the interview is over or the equipment is off.
Be helpful and volunteer to get information. Make yourself available. Respect deadlines.	Refuse to talk further. Ask "How did I do?"
Watch for and read the resulting report.	Ask to review the story before publication or broadcast.
Call the reporter to politely point out inaccuracies, if any.	Complain to the reporter's boss first.

Media relations in a crisis situation

A crisis is an unplanned event that triggers a real, perceived or possible threat to life, health and safety, the environment or the water supplier's credibility. As a result, a crisis communication plan needs to be formulated, in order to:

1. Control communication.
2. Restore order as smoothly and quickly as possible.

Elements of a crisis:

- Crisis happen with little or no warning.
- Little or no information, especially in the initial stages.
- Any available information is contradictory, incomplete and will change constantly.

How to handle the media during a crisis:

- Maintain a balanced attitude.
- Remember, it's a two-way street.
- "Give-to-get" - meaning you gain media cooperation in proportion to the cooperation you give them.
- Be honest, accessible and understanding.

Thrust of media relations in a crisis

- Provide media with full and accurate information.
- Information should be based on verifiable facts.
- Communicate information as early as possible.
- If it's bad news, get it all out at once - don't wait for the media to find out first.
- Avoid a gradual unravelling of bad news.
- By getting all the bad news out at once, right away, you can get past the bad news and turn your attention (and the media's) to what you're doing to correct the problem.

During a crisis

- Silence kills! Silence is equated with guilt.
- Don't delay! The first 24 hours are critical.
- Permit controlled media access to your site (if possible or realistic).
- Never speculate. Only speak the facts as you know them.
- Monitor all media reports and correct any misinformation the moment it is reported. Otherwise, other media will repeat it.

What can the media do for you?

- Assist in pre-crisis education.
- Warn.
- Pass your request or information to the public.
- Reassure the public.
- Repudiate rumours.
- Help the response.
- Be a source of information to the water supplier.

Most frequently asked questions in a crisis:

- What happened?
- When and where?
- Who was included?
- What was the cause?
- What are you going to do about it?
- Has this happened before?
- Who's to blame?

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