

- don't assume an interviewer's facts are correct, especially if citing contradictory evidence or information (you can respond with "I'll have to check into that ... ");
- don't be afraid to say "I don't know" – at all costs, avoid the temptation to "wing it"; and
- be aware of "media triggers" (see Chapter 5, Section 5.1).

## Press conferences

Press conferences may be useful if there is an important message to get out quickly to the public or there is a need to demonstrate that a situation is being managed and someone is clearly "in charge". You should consider carefully, however, whether a press conference is either necessary or useful. Successful press conferences take time and effort to plan. A badly planned and executed press conference can undermine public and media confidence and be very difficult to recover from.

Ask yourself the following.

- Is there is a real need to orchestrate a group of experts or responders, to provide a situation report or update, or to transmit complicated information?
- Is there enough material to justify the time and effort required by you and other participants (and the media) to attend a press conference?

You should also beware of press conference "bear traps":

- a press conference starts the moment you enter the room, so be careful about off-the-cuff comments and asides to other people; and
- avoid having too many supporters (people involved in the incident but not taking part in the press conference directly) in the room, who may be pressed later for further information.

## Public Meetings

If you are presenting information and key messages to a public meeting, you will benefit from following these simple rules:

- have a strong, clear introduction;
- explain who you are and why you are involved;
- explain who your organisation is, why it is involved and what you want to achieve through the meeting;
- an audience will make an assessment of your credibility and trustworthiness very quickly (within 30 seconds), so being perceived as empathetic is vitally important – show recognition of the audience's concerns and viewpoint and express commitment to work with them;
- develop the key message(s): select a maximum of three most important messages (SOCHO first) and promote these as the audience's "take home" messages;
- messages delivered in public meetings must be consistent with messages delivered via other routes;
- provide data to support your message and advice and show awareness of uncertainties and limitations in the evidence base; and
- if using audio-visual aids, keep them simple and have back-ups.

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# Communicating with the public about health risks



## Quick Reference Guide

### Health Protection Network Scottish Guidance

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## Communicating with the public about health risks – Quick Reference Guide

Health Protection professionals and others in public health are often under considerable pressure to provide information rapidly to the public, usually via the media. There is now an expectation of openness. However, this needs to be balanced against the possible risks. Therefore before providing information, a clear rationale for communicating is essential, to help explain the need to get the message across to the public.

Specific reasons for communication work include:

- Raising awareness of hazards and risk
- Alerting people to an immediate danger
- Providing information on avoiding hazards and harm
- Advising on steps being taken to handle an issue
- Explaining the steps being taken to recover and return to normality
- Advice on seeking further help and advice

**This quick reference guide provides practical advice when faced with the need to communicate about health risks. More detailed advice can be found in the relevant section of the full guidance document.**

## Developing a risk communication strategy (DISSECT) [see section 5.3]

1. **Define** – the issue or problem
2. **Identify** – the stakeholders and the target audience
3. **Set** – the aim and detailed objectives
4. **Select** – the key messages
5. **Engage** – partners who will be involved in managing the incident and who need to contribute to key message development
6. **Choose** – the communication channels (methods, tools and processes)
7. **Track** – and evaluate the impact

## Advice on working with the media [see section 5.6 and 7.2]

Journalists and other media representatives look for information on the following key questions: who, what, when, where, why and how. Most of the information they collect relates to these questions.

In general, the media believe the public will want:

- information on what the situation means to them and the personal impact on their life and routine;
- access to more information via a helpline or other suitable means, such as a website; and
- information on what is being done on their behalf to manage the situation.

Media representatives require a certain amount of information within the first hour of any major acute or sudden incident, such as:

- a well-developed arrangement for providing them with information, ideally coordinated by all the relevant agencies involved;
- identified telephone contacts and numbers; and
- opportunities for on-site presence for interviews, briefings and press conferences.

You should organise your messages in a hierarchy, with the SOCHO (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3) first. The space or time the mass media can allocate to your “story” may be very limited (perhaps as short as twenty seconds in broadcast media to a couple of column inches in print), so you need to get the key messages across quickly and succinctly.

## Writing press releases

- make the content newsworthy – clearly identify what the problem is at the beginning;
- use an attention-grabbing headline if possible (or appropriate);
- answer the “who, what, when, where, why and how” questions in a strong leading paragraph – the first 10 words are crucial to securing interest by the media;

- use a second paragraph to elaborate the content of the first and expand the details;
- summarise the key messages;
- give contact details for follow up; and
- supplement a news release with “tip sheets/ fact sheets/FAQs” to provide supplementary information and to anticipate the most likely follow-on questions.

## Interviews (TV, radio and press)

If you're being interviewed by the media, you should:

- keep calm and be courteous, collected, confident and considerate of the reporter's needs;
- have a clear agenda and purpose – focus on getting the message across;
- see your role as helping the reporter in understanding the right messages and passing the information to the public;
- make your points in 30 seconds and in less than 90 words;
- don't make commitments or promises you can't keep and don't offer opinions beyond your competence – only discuss what you know, not what you think;
- don't speculate, and don't be tempted to “show off”;
- correct something you've got wrong quickly and openly – don't try to disguise it or cover it up;
- never lie to, embarrass or argue with a reporter, but don't allow the interviewer to put words in your mouth;
- rephrase questions that appear loaded or leading;
- don't disparage other people's views or abilities;
- avoid the use of “no comment”;
- adapt the level of your responses to the reporter's understanding of the issue;