

Written evidence submitted by the Science Media Centre (EME0009)

The Science Media Centre is an independent venture working to promote the voices, stories and views from the scientific community to the news media when science is in the headlines.

- Overall the UK media coverage of the Ebola outbreak was accurate and evidence-based, and government departments such the Department of Health (DH) and Public Health England (PHE) played a key role in fielding media enquiries from journalists and informing them of developments.
- However, unlike during the swine flu outbreak where relevant parties such as the Science Media Centre were kept in the loop by government departments, for us the Ebola outbreak was also characterised by a lack of communication and openness with independent organisations working on the story, and at times with journalists regarding issues relevant to UK preparedness.

USING INDEPENDENT THIRD PARTY EXPERTS IN THE MIDDLE OF A CRISIS

1. In times of public health crisis, evidence shows that people respond well to a single unified public health message and that's the ideal.
2. However, we operate in a 24-hour rolling news environment where journalists and the public are sceptical of official government messages and will always look to other views. There is a strong need for independent third party experts to be available, as the press will still run a story in the absence of reputable experts, but will instead use less credible commentators. The SMC coordinates many independent experts from universities and agencies like the Wellcome Trust, NHS Trusts, Medical Research Council (MRC) etc. who are all highly qualified to speak to the media in times of public health crises.
3. We feel that government is nervous about these independent voices and the risk that there might be conflicting expert advice. We understand that completely but feel that the reality of today's media climate creates a need for independent experts.
4. There is also evidence that at times of crisis people seek out multiple sources. We feel that the government should embrace the fact that authoritative voices are commenting outside of the official response, even if some of the advice is conflicting. In fact most of it is not.
5. We wonder if, rather than worry about these independent experts briefing the media, DH or PHE should have organised briefings for independent third party experts to ensure that key independent spokespeople are well briefed and fully up to date with developments.

SHARING INFORMATION

1. PHE and DH regularly sent out press releases and alerts as developments occurred which kept the media informed and up to date about potential UK Ebola cases, negative results from potential cases and announcements from the chief medical officer (CMO).
2. However, these releases were often not sent to other relevant organisations such as the SMC or institutes with appropriate experts that were also responding to media enquiries. This meant that crucial stakeholders in the story were left out of the loop, and were unable to update the relevant experts about critical developments ahead of journalists calling them for comment.
3. Information was passed freely between academic experts on informal mailing lists, and we would have liked to have seen official announcements and updates widely shared in the same way.

GIVING EXPERTS FREEDOM TO SPEAK

1. Several highly qualified independent experts who were affiliated with government felt nervous about speaking to the media due to fear of going against government messages. While caution during rapidly-developing public health scares is sensible, we feel that these reputable and knowledgeable experts should feel able and should be encouraged to add their expertise to the

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media coverage of the outbreak and answer questions put to them by the press without fear of going off government message.

UK PREPAREDNESS AND UNCERTAINTY

1. At the time when media interest in the Ebola outbreak was reaching its peak, attention shifted from the situation in West Africa to the preparedness of the UK to handle any cases in this country. While communication about the very low risk to the public from the repatriated Ebola cases was very clear and accurate, we felt other aspects of UK preparedness strategy, such as whether contacts of a potential Ebola case would be immediately quarantined, were not communicated clearly at all by government.
2. During a rapidly-evolving story it is perfectly reasonable for there to be uncertainty around the precise strategies implemented as more information comes to light, but we strongly feel that this uncertainty can and should be openly and transparently communicated to the news media and public without inducing panic. Instead, journalists expressed their frustration to us that they could not get answers to their questions, and experts became nervous about talking about UK preparedness, when they should have felt comfortable saying 'that's not decided yet'.
3. In the wake of this uncertainty around the exact strategy of UK preparedness, we were very disappointed when a background media briefing on the topic, featuring a planned panel of experts including Professor Paul Cosford from PHE, had to be cancelled despite huge media interest in and confusion about the area. A background briefing on UK preparedness held in November 2014 as originally planned would have greatly prepared the national media for when a UK case of Ebola did eventually occur in late December 2015.

PROACTIVE MEDIA WORK

1. During a health crisis developments can occur rapidly, making reactive media work difficult if experts are not immediately available, and increasing the likelihood that less qualified but available experts will be used. We would strongly urge government to consider more proactive media work such as background press briefings to ensure that the press are well informed by the experts and prepared to cover any significant developments accurately and without panicking the public.
2. The SMC did run a background briefing with experts from the Wellcome Trust, LSHTM, various other universities, PHE and the CMO towards the start of the outbreak in September 2014, which was very helpful for journalists and helped to clarify potentially misleading information about mortality rates and transmission routes of Ebola. This shows that collaboration between multiple bodies is possible and should be the model for future activity.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

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