

Bullet points for SMC evidence to Cabinet review of swine flu

CMO, DH, HPA handled the communications really well. Weekly press briefings bringing in experts were warmly welcomed by the journalists, who on the whole felt well briefed with good information and access to the right people. Daily updates from HPA and DH helped us enormously in terms of basic facts on spread etc

Using Independent third party experts in midst of crisis

1. In times of public health crisis evidence shows that people respond well to a single unified public health message and that is 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 as if the press aren't given reputable experts, it doesn't stop them running the story, and instead they use less and less credible figures. The SMC co-ordinates many independent experts from Universities and agencies like the Wellcome Trust, MRC, etc
3. We feel that DH and other official agencies are 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 is that there is a need for them.
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 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 media, DH should have organised briefings for independent third party experts along the lines of the MOD briefings to ensure that key spokespeople are well briefed

Filling the vacuum

1. Leaving a vacuum is always dangerous and can easily be filled by less credible experts. While the journalists were delighted with the regular weekly briefings by the CMO, they did come to the SMC a lot to fill the huge vacuum in between the briefings. During the gaps where official sources were not responding to media queries, the SMC ran background briefings, issued fact sheets and supplied experts for back to back interviews. We think the combination of official briefings backed up by proactive expert comment coming out of the SMC helped the overall communication of evidence based messages.

Don't remove independent scientists from public debate by asking them to become government advisers

1. When SAGE was set up several of our top scientists felt unable to brief the media while also advising government.
2. We would like to see this change - these are the top experts in the country and are needed to advise Government abut also needed to advise and inform public opinion. We feel that they could be asked to keep discussions at SAGE confidential while still being allowed and indeed encouraged to brief the media and inform the public in their general areas of expertise
3. We have lobbied for this with Volcanic Ash and seem to have persuaded them - we would like to see it extended to all SAGE committees
4. Some scientists felt intimidated by being warned about official secrets act

More transparency and openness

1. We think there could be more openness about the nature of discussions within SAGE. Questions about whether to mass vaccinate or hand out anti-virals more widely were widely debated amongst scientific and medical experts and trying to suggest that there was absolute agreement led to suspicions amongst journalists
2. We were especially disappointed when a Briefing on vaccine safety with David Salisbury was cancelled at the 11th hour despite huge interest from journalists and we fear that sometimes there was too much caution when actually the health reporters are almost all responsible and careful

Risk communication

1. No doubt there will much discussion about the 65,000 deaths figure issued by the CMO after seeing Imperial models. It is our strongly held viewed that the CMO had to give the media this figure as if he had attempted to hide it in any way it would have been seized upon. However, the SMC has successfully run many, many briefings where a range of risk is communicated and we believe that it is possible to emphasise the caveats and appeal to the responsible journalists not to emphasise the upper range without heavily qualifying.
2. All scientists need to get much better at saying 'I don't know' and admitting that there is often huge uncertainty and differences of opinion about the actual level of risk. Attempting to reassure the public and journalists by asserting a level of uncertainty and agreement has backfired badly in the case of climate change and has started to backfire in swine flu. The truth is that in the midst of this crisis the government and experts simply did not know and could not know exactly how sever or mild this would be and should have been more open and honest about the level of uncertainty

SMC May 2010