

Using the media to manage and control diseases



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7 Dec 2006

Communicators need to see the media as part of any positive process, not the enemy. They should have better skills in handling the media, make information available and understand the public's rights and needs for accurate communication, Dr Lucille Blumberg, of the National Institute of Communicable Diseases, told journalists during the two-day media workshop held this week at the US Consulate-General in Johannesburg.

The workshop, themed "Avian and Human Pandemic Influenza: Getting the Story" was organised by the Washington-based International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB) in collaboration with Voice of America and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), and was attended by reporters from Lesotho, South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This workshop was designed to educate and inform reporters, editors and broadcasters about the health, social and economic aspects of Avian and Human Influenza, and discuss preparedness for any future pandemics, Joan Mower of the International Media Training and Development said.

Role of the media

Throughout the workshop, speakers emphasised the role of the media in managing and controlling Avian Influenza (or bird flu/H5N1 virus), which they said is unpredictable (no early warnings); bears similarities with the H1N1 virus that killed more than 40 million people in 1918; and could have serious socio-economic and political implications if it starts to be transmitted from one human to another.

So far, 158 human deaths have been occurred worldwide out of 258 cases, mostly in China, Vietnam and Indonesia. In Africa, seven people (all women) have already died from the disease in Egypt.

In South Africa, the poultry industry has a turnover of more than R20 billion and employs 73 000 people, Kevin Lovell, CEO of the South African Poultry Association said.

"It is impossible to say when this virus will mutate enough to be transmitted from one human to another and how severe the disease will be. However, another flu pandemic is almost a certainty. That is why there is a need to be alert and prepared," Lovell warned.

"But with effective communication, the spread of the disease can be managed. Journalists have a critical role to play in situations like these - before and after the outbreaks. They should explain to communities why these things are happening

and how to protect themselves - these are the key messages," Dr Gameli Seadzi, World Health Organisation field officer, said.

Dr Fred Musisi, UN Livestock Specialist, echoed Seadzi's sentiments: "The role of the media is not to be underestimated in situations such as these. People will need to be adequately informed on their responsibilities as well as actions towards the control of the disease."

"Communicators need to be transparent"

However, in a continent infested by state corruption, abuse of power, distrust of the media, the journalists' jobs might further be complicated by the attitude of uncaring politicians, government spin-doctors and not-so-credible PROs who withhold information and give inconsistent, conflicting and incomplete press releases to the media to 'protect the public and minimise panic'.

Dr Blumberg said, "Communicators need to be transparent, candid and provide factual and complete information in order to protect the public.

"Failure to do so," Blumberg added, "might delay outbreak control, undermines public trust and compliance, and leads to unnecessary prolonged economic, social and political turmoil."

Richard Odindo, UNICEF Avian Influenza Consultant based in Nairobi, told delegates that the media need to vociferously advocate and lobby for certain things to happen and certain strategic decisions can be made.

Outbreaks are newsworthy and make headlines, and this is where certain sections of the media take advantage to publish sensational stories that create panic among communities.

Unethical reporting

Dr Blumberg warned against these practices, which she called 'unethical reporting'. "Avoid sensationalism that might fuel public anxiety. Do not publish rumours and conflicting reports. Research, check and verify your information before publishing it. Strive to get your information from independent sources."

Speakers at the Joburg workshop included Celia Abolnik of the Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute, Gabriella Waaijman of the UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs and Phyllis Jones-Changa of the Academy for Educational Development.

This is the first of the six similar sessions for journalists in Africa. Others will be held in Kano, Abuja and Lagos (Nigeria), Dakar (Senegal) and Nairobi (Kenya) in early 2007.

For more information about the workshops, contact Tebogo Sepeng on +27 (0)11 838 2231 or +27 (0)84 950 0859, or Joan Mower on + 27 (0)82 040 4833 or email .

- Information about bird flu can be found by logging on the following websites: www.nicd.ac.za, www.hhs.gov/pandemicflu, www.avianflu.futurehs.com and www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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