

## **Communication standards during a media crisis**

Given the nature of the work we do within the health service, there are times when our services are placed under more demand than is normal – like when our emergency services are involved in responding to a major emergency. Also, there can be times when our work and our services come under more scrutiny than normal, due to incidents within the services themselves.

Communication responses in times of crisis are hugely important, and have great bearing on the HSE's reputation and the confidence the public hold in our services.

In a major emergency, like road collisions, fires, floods etc, there are in place agreed arrangements for communications within the HSE and with other agencies like the Gardai, Fire Service, Defence Forces and Local Authorities. Where the HSE declares a serious incident within a service, there are also agreed protocols for handling communications. The National Communications Unit, incorporating the Press Office and the Area Communications Managers, will take a lead role in managing communications in any crisis situation. The following guidance is of general use if you are involved in responding to an urgent communications issue.

### **Communication priorities**

Communication responses will depend on the circumstances of the specific situation. Successful communication in a crisis is an effect of setting priorities.

**Priority 1:-** those most directly affected (injured parties, if any)

**Priority 2:-** Employees (although they can be a Priority 1 depending on the issue)

**Priority 3:-** Those indirectly affected – family, patients, government, regulatory bodies, patient/service user representatives, suppliers etc

**Priority 4:-** Media and other channels of external communication (reports, reviews etc)

A crisis may mean that there is almost simultaneous communication to all four priorities but the order is important. Ensuring that those most directly affected are communicated with first is essential. Those affected will receive information without any inaccuracies or emotional reporting. When planning your crisis communications you must work with your Area Communications Manager, Head of the National Press Office or the Serious Incident Management Team.

It is also important to maintain our day to day services when any incident is underway, so consideration should be given to maintaining communication with any clients not directly affected but who may be wondering if they should attend for appointments etc.

## Communication Principles

1. **Communicate with those most directly affected first**, the HSE's first obligation is to the health and welfare of service users, affected staff and restoration of the HSE service affected. When a crisis occurs the HSE will;
  - Respond speedily
  - Take appropriate action and responsibility
  - Follow existing protocols and procedures
  - Make every effort to ensure transparent decision-making
  - Explain to the public as soon as possible
  - Use simple direct reassuring messages
2. **Local communication is best.** Communication should be handled as close to the emergency as possible. If it is a corporate or national issue than it will be handled by the relevant national manager. Local managers and clinicians should be the lead spokespersons working with the Area Communications Managers.
3. **Speak with one voice:** have a consistent agreed message that all spokespersons are familiar with. Consistency, accuracy and timely responses are important principles when dealing with the media, staff and key stakeholders. The way information is presented can be adapted for the relevant audiences - but it is essential that there are consistent messages.
4. **Act quickly** – in an emergency the first hour or two is critical in getting your information out and getting the facts on the record. The media can broadcast across the country in a matter of seconds. If the news coverage is based on facts supplied by the HSE rather than media speculation, the news is likely to be more accurate and balanced. The first hour of emergency response is critical to establishing the perception that the HSE is actively managing the situation.
5. **Co-operate with the media.** Make every effort to respond to media queries, the majority of calls will be managed by the National Press Office/Area Communications Office at either national or local level.
6. **Media queries:** think of the questions that you might anticipate from the media. Such questions might be:
  - Why didn't you act sooner?
  - When did you know about this?
  - Why didn't you let people know sooner?
  - Why did you wait until now to act?
  - How can we trust you
  - What if your approach doesn't work?

At all times either the Area Communications Manager, National Press Office or Serious Untoward Incident team must be consulted during a crisis communications situation.

