

Media Relations Protocols for HSE Employees

Why A Press and Media Relations Office/Area Communications Office?

In any healthy democracy an active media is an essential component, publicising the achievements and results but also frequently questioning the policies and actions of those in authority. Most state agencies and Government departments have professionally press offices in recognition of this.

The HSE recognises that working with the media requires an appropriate response as the media can influence public opinion about the services provided by the HSE and the staff providing those services. The HSE is committed to being open and proactive about promoting its role within Irish society. The HSE is also dedicated to protecting the reputation of staff and the privacy of patients and accordingly the Press and Media Relations Office/Area Communications Office also acts as a counter to negative commentary and press intrusion at times.

These guidelines outline the role of the National Press Office/Area Communications Office and guide staff who receive media queries; they are an amalgamation of the various guidelines that have been in existence in the former health boards for some years. All major organisations recognise the importance of working with the media and work to similar guidance.

What does the Press and Media Relations Office/Area Communications Office do?

The Press and Media Relations Office/Area Communications Office provides the HSE with a professional service that comprises public relations, reputation management, crisis management and risk assessment. The Office's functions include:

- Promoting a positive profile of the HSE and publicising achievements and reforms.
- Ensuring that the CEO and HSE's vision is carried through the media
- Protecting the integrity, credibility and reputation of the HSE and staff within media coverage of the health services
- Media relations – to ensure balanced coverage in the media of the work of the HSE and the Irish Health Services.
- Ensuring all media queries are answered promptly and accurately, reflecting HSE policy, objectives, work and initiatives.
- Liaising on all media relations with the Department of Health and Children and other Government departments, State agencies and public representatives.
- Liaising with HSE staff on all media and communications matters. Providing a support/advisory service to relevant staff members on communications issues.
- Provision of out of hours service for media queries as required
- Arranging appropriate media interviews with staff and providing preparation and briefing support to interviewees.
- Ensuring up to date monitoring of media coverage
- Maximising media coverage of a wide range of public functions and launches.

When a Journalist Calls...

For many staff it can be an unnerving experience to receive a call from a journalist or to find oneself being asked abruptly to answer a question for publication. Staff should refer the call to the local Area Communications Office in the first instance or the national press and media relations office if necessary.

Journalists are always obliged to identify themselves as such under the NUJ Code of Ethics and in almost all cases will do so. Staff should remember that anything they do say to a journalist can be used and quoted and the staff member can even be named. In order to protect staff, the reputation of the HSE and patient confidentiality, the following protocols should be adhered to:

- All media queries, including requests to take photographs or film, should be referred to the HSE Communications office in your area.
- All statements to be issued publicly should be cleared by a senior manager and the HSE Communications office in your area.
- Any invitations to the media (or public events in the planning stage) should be issued by the HSE Communications office in your area.
- Any knowledge of journalistic activity concerning a HSE matter should be notified to the HSE Communications office in your area.
- Any development which is certain to arouse significant media interest (positive or negative) should be notified firstly to the relevant senior manager and also to the HSE Communications office in your area.

When the Communications Office Calls...

When dealing with a media query, the national Press and Media Relations Office or your local Area Communications team may need to contact members of staff for the necessary details. A response will then be prepared in conjunction with the department/service manager concerned.

We endeavour to be as co-operative and facilitating as possible with the media. This means that our management of interviews, articles and all information must ensure the following:

- Our patients and clients confidentiality is protected at all times
- All information is accurate and up to date
- Each query is dealt with promptly
- HSE policy is clear
- Responses are cleared by a senior manager

As the media can operate to quite tight deadlines, staff should always be aware that requests for information from a press officer need to be dealt within such deadlines. Media deadlines can vary from a couple of minutes to a couple of days and the press officer contacting you will specify the deadline he/she is working to. Staff should inform the Press Officer if there is a difficulty meeting that deadline as soon as possible.

A prompt reply and assistance to the press office maximises the input the HSE may have in any given story. No information or a late response may lead to a story reflecting unfairly on staff or services.

What to do if the media present on HSE premises seeking interviews or photographs

Interviews, filming or photography should not be carried out by the media on HSE premises without the permission of your Communications office. Where the media contact the Communications office to seek permission to film or take photographs of a HSE premises, the Communications office will consult with the relevant manager. If permission is granted the Communications office will make the appropriate arrangements.

If the media present on HSE premises seeking interviews/photographs, without prior approval, you should inform them that it is HSE policy that all media requests are referred to the Communications office. You should give them contact details for your Communications office and you should also contact your Communications office immediately to advise that the media are present at your premises/location.

Media Interviews

The giving of interviews, statements or any other information connected with the services provided by the HSE should not be undertaken without the prior approval of the National Press and Media Relations Office or your local Area Communications team. This is to ensure that only accurate and authorised information is issued.

A clear procedure for dealing with interviews is absolutely necessary for the HSE. This protects members of staff from being forced to make immediate comment and it also enables a consistent and clear approach to be adopted regarding the HSE's viewpoint. At times, members of staff may speak with the media as representatives of their professional association or trade union. This is acceptable but staff speaking in such a capacity must always ensure that such interviews and their comments are being made in the context of their association or union and are not representative of the HSE. Such interviews cannot take place on HSE sites. Such interviews must also not breach patient or work confidentiality.

Patient/Client Confidentiality

The HSE places great emphasis on the need for strictest confidentiality in respect of our patients and clients. Every patient and client in the care of the HSE is entitled to the reassurance that the HSE will not comment on the particular circumstances of their case or engage in public debate on private matters or permit to them being photographed or other media intrusion while in our care without permission. It is for these reasons of patient/client confidentiality that the HSE will not comment on the clinical nature of individual cases.

Checklist

When responding to a press query please use the following checklist:

- Take the journalist's name and organisation
- Establish the deadline
- Establish exactly what information the journalist is seeking
- Contact the Area Communications Office or the National Press Office
- Agree a response and arrange for the National Press Office or Area Communications Manager to respond

Contact details

National Press Office	01 635 2840	
Dublin/Mid Leinster Area - Communications Office Arden Road, Tullamore, Co. Offaly	Tel: 057 - 935 9795	Email: internal.communications@hse.ie
Dublin/North East - Area Communications Office Dublin Road, Kells, Co. Meath	Tel: 046 - 928 0611	Email: communications.dne@hse.ie
South - Area Communications Office Aras Slainte, Wilton Road, Cork	Tel: 021 4928523/4	Email: communications@hse.ie
West - Area Communications Office Merlin Park, Galway	Tel: 091 - 775 474	Email: communicationswest@hse.ie

Please use these numbers at all times – out of hours contacts are available from these phone numbers.