

NORWEGIANS APPROVE OF THE HEALTH AUTHORITIES' STRATEGY TO COMMUNICATE WORST CASE PANDEMIC SCENARIOS

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According to the Norwegian pandemic preparedness plans, health authorities shall assess their communication activities before and during an outbreak of infectious diseases. A survey was conducted on 29 April 2009 on acceptance of communications by the national public health authorities concerning the emerging threat from the new influenza A(H1N1) virus. The survey was similar to other surveys in 2005-6 about the avian flu. The results were not very different – the overall majority of the people interviewed were not worried and the health authorities were regarded as trustworthy.

Introduction

Norwegian media coverage (broadcast and press) of the new influenza A(H1N1) virus outbreak in Mexico and the United States rose markedly in the days following the World Health Organization's (WHO) alert on 24 April 2009 [1] and a substantial number of domestic news articles were registered. Spokespersons talking at daily news briefings on behalf of Norway's health authorities did not rule out the worst case scenarios laid down in the National Pandemic Contingency Plan. Thus, the possibility of a severe pandemic caught the headlines which warned that the number of deaths might equal that of the Spanish flu 90 years ago. A further focus of the media reports was on public preparedness measures and advice to the public.

In order to evaluate the plans for a future communication strategy and to assess the public relations work done from 24 April to 29 April, a survey was conducted on 29 April 2009 by one of the largest public research companies in Norway, Synovate Research. The research was done on behalf of the Norwegian health authorities and it took place in the hours just before WHO raised the phase of pandemic alert level from phase 4 to phase 5.

Methods and results

The survey was conducted following standard procedures by picking phone numbers randomly from the telephone directory. A total of 1,368 Norwegians were contacted and 506 (37%) interviewed, weighted according to age, sex and geographical location to make the selection representative. They were given the following possible answers to each of the six statements enumerated below:

- I completely agree or partially agree
- I neither agree nor disagree

- I partially disagree or totally disagree
- I don't know / cannot answer

The following passage presents the results for each statement.

"I am not worried about catching the 'swine flu' now." Eight out of 10 Norwegians stated that they are not worried.

"I feel confident that Norwegian health authorities are well prepared for a possible 'swine flu' outbreak with human-to-human transmission in Norway." Eight out of 10 Norwegians are confident that the authorities are well prepared.

"Norwegian health authorities have provided good and balanced information about the 'swine flu'." Seven out of 10 respondents consider the authorities have provided good and balanced information.

"Norwegian health authorities have exaggerated the danger related to the 'swine flu'." Five out of 10 participants do not think the authorities have exaggerated the dangers.

"Outbreaks, such as the 'swine flu', should be taken seriously because one never knows when a dangerous flu pandemic will break out." Nine out of 10 agree that these outbreaks should be taken seriously.

"There is too much media focus on the 'swine flu'." Six out of 10 Norwegians think there is too much media focus on the topic.

Conclusions

Similar surveys on the perception of the Norwegian citizens on the communication activities of the health authorities were conducted in 2005 and 2006 concerning the avian flu. The maximum press coverage on this public health event was in February-March 2005 with a focus on worst case pandemic scenarios. There were 20% more articles about bird flu registered in the domestic press during that period than during the influenza A(H1N1) outbreak so far. The answers were more or less in line with this year's survey.

Our surveys are examples of what health authorities can do to monitor the impact of their communication efforts on national public opinion. As all opinion polls, they are a snapshot valid for

a particular context, time and space. However, at the time of the surveys, Norwegians seemed to be open to listening to worst case scenarios and have confidence in the authorities.

The data presented from the survey allow for further comments. Surveys like these may be useful when planning risk communication strategies [2]. Further research on the topic should be inspiring for health authorities in our as well as other countries.

References

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