

Improving Risk Communication: Identification of Key Issues

Daniel Krewski, PhD, MHA
Professor and Director
McLaughlin Centre for
Population Health Risk Assessment
University of Ottawa

Ottawa, Ontario
October 1, 2009

Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa



uOttawa

L'Université canadienne
Canada's university



www.uOttawa.ca

Strengthening Risk Communication in Canada

- **What** do we want to do?
 - Strengthen public [recognizing that there are multiple publics] risk communication and establish ‘best practices’: communicate what we know (in understandable terms) and what we don’t know (uncertainty) (including knowledge gaps)
 - Recognize that scientific evidence and social values are both necessarily involved in decision making: we need to be transparent about their respective contributions to risk assessment and risk management [other factors, such as traditional knowledge in native communities, may also be relevant]
 - Establish principles (e.g., two-way communication) for communicating how evidence based and values based decision making criteria are integrated: how can we make decisions based on both criteria more transparent
 - Need to promote timely communications, in order they they be effective (communication should begin even before a risk issue emerges)

Strengthening Risk Communication in Canada

- **Who** should do it?
 - Journalists, scientists, physicians, government agencies, public interest groups, aboriginal communities, industry, other: all stakeholders need to be involved in risk communication, even though different stakeholders will naturally have different perspectives on risk [such interactions will need to take place early on when the risk messages are being designed]
 - How should these stakeholders work together to maximize the effectiveness of communications programs? [multi-stakeholder processes will be important in this regard]

Strengthening Risk Communication in Canada

- **When**, in the life cycle of a risk issue, do we need to communicate?
 - Timeliness is critical to success in communication (particularly for issues that are currently in ‘crisis’ mode) [the journalist’s perspective on timeliness is ‘tomorrow is too late’]
 - Scenario planning can be helpful in the short term (as risk decisions are being approached)
 - Strategic communications planning needed for long term success (anticipate issues before they arise; build understanding of risk issues among the public and other stakeholders)
 - Communications needs to be considered at all stages of the evolution of a risk issue

Strengthening Risk Communication in Canada

- **Where** should we do it?
 - Science Media Centre?
 - Academic programs in risk communication?
 - Strengthen government capacity for proactive communications?

Strengthening Risk Communication in Canada

- **Why** do we need to do it?
 - Past experience has indicated that the public is not adequately informed about chemical and other risk issues

Strengthening Risk Communication in Canada

- **How** should we do it?
 - Establish conceptual framework for effective risk communication?
 - Develop infrastructure needed to support enhanced risk communications (Science Media Centre, academic programs, government programs?)
 - How can we encourage active participation in risk communication among all relevant stakeholders?
 - How can we engage the broadest possible spectrum of Canadian scientists in risk communication?
 - How can we take advantage of existing infrastructure and expertise in risk communication?

Strengthening Risk Communication in Canada: Priority Suggestions from Workshop Participants

- **How** should we do it?
 - Engage the broadest possible community of experts
 - Understand information needs of the message recipients
 - Establish a Science Media Centre in Canada
 - Establish a broad based web-based risk communication program
 - Ensure that spokespersons have appropriate expertise (competency in risk communication)
 - Incorporate training in risk communication in graduate programs in Canadian universities
 - Develop criteria for evaluating success of risk communications programs that have been implemented (has risk been reduced as a consequence of the program?)
 - Need to take advantage of multiple communications channels – a ‘clearinghouse’ or ‘portal’ could be useful in this regard

Strengthening Risk Communication in Canada: Priority Suggestions from Workshop Participants

- **How** should we do it?
 - Conduct case studies of past successes and failures in risk communication in order to define roles of various stakeholders
 - Develop training programs for journalists who are not trained in science
 - Develop an overarching framework for effective risk communication, along with fundamental principles of effective risk communication (the framework and principles should meet the needs of all stakeholders)
 - Develop risk communication training programs for government staff (governments have a major responsibility for risk management decision making in Canada)
 - Present messages in plain language

Strengthen Risk Communication: Other Suggestions from Workshop Participants

- NGO's have an important role to play in risk communication
- Native populations warrant special consideration in risk communication, taking into account their unique socio-cultural characteristics
- Consider both transmitter and receiver of risk information when designing risk messages
- Case studies indicated divergent risk messages were being transmitted by different groups: how can coherent messages that the public will be better able to understand be developed?
- Can we educate the public to question scientific information that they are provided with in order to gain a better appreciation of the risk issue of interest
- All stakeholders (including the public) have a shared responsibility to communicate and understand risk issues
- Need to identify shared values, such as honesty, integrity, and mutual respect, that can form the basis for principles of risk communication

Strengthen Risk Communication: Other Suggestions from Workshop Participants

- Transparency of criteria underlying risk management decisions is important
- Need venues for stakeholders to get together to discuss risk communication issues and strategies
- Guidance on principles of risk communication can be found in the following documents:
 - Federal government has a framework for science advice in decision making that provides guidance on effective risk communication: consultation with all affected stakeholders is a key component of this framework
 - The federal government's framework for the application of precaution in decision making is also useful: traditional knowledge in aboriginal communities is included in this framework
 - Health Products and Food Branch has a policy on public input in the review of health products, that provides guidance in integrating different types of evidence in risk management

Strengthen Risk Communication: Other Suggestions from Workshop Participants

- A follow-up workshop on the public(s) needs for risk information may be useful
- Communicating to the media and public is presently all risk and no benefit for academic scientists
- Take advantage of recently retired academics who are not preoccupied by fund raising
- Encourage granting agencies to include communications as part of their evaluation of the impact of the work
- Encourage health professionals to engage in risk communication
- Who are the experts that we want to engage in risk communication?
- Can we prioritize risk issues that warrant our attention?
- Ensure a strong science communication component in any risk communication exercise
- Need to be aware of roles of others (in different disciplines) in risk communication

Strengthen Risk Communication: Other Suggestions from Workshop Participants

- Ensure competency in risk communication among risk policy makers
- Take advantage of materials that are already available (such as the pamphlets on risk from the SMC in the UK)
- Adopt an international perspective in order to benefit from knowledge and experience in other countries (this will be essential for international risk issues such as climate change and BSE)
- Case studies in risk communication would help us to learn from our success and failures
- Can Canadian granting agencies include a knowledge transfer component in more grants made to scientists, as an incentive for them to devote more time to risk communication (SMC has promoted this in the UK – all three Canadian granting councils are sponsors of Canadian SMC)
- Focus groups and surveys can be useful in evaluating the effectiveness of risk communications programs

