

Communicating with the public during incidents involving mass casualty decontamination: highlighting the gaps in preparedness and response

Research aim:

- To critically appraise current planning for communicating with members of the public during Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) incidents involving decontamination

• Evidence from small-scale incidents involving decontamination

• Review of 17 responder guidance documents

• Review of published decontamination exercises



Evidence from small-scale incidents involving decontamination

Potential issues with decontamination:

- Non-compliance with decontamination procedures
- "They said to take off all my clothes. I left my underwear on. I said 'I'm not taking them off'" (Hanley, 1999)
- High anxiety about decontamination
- People who are not contaminated may experience psychological symptoms

Improve management of decontamination by:

- Increasing provision of practical information
- Communicating openly about decontamination
- Protecting victims' modesty and dignity

Review of 17 responder guidance documents

- Initial Google search, followed by searching individual organisation websites (e.g. UK Fire and Rescue Service, Metropolitan Police etc.)
- Available in non-restricted literature
- Produced in English
- Taken from UK, USA, and Australia

Assumptions about public behaviour

- Public may be disorderly or aggressive
- "Risks to CBRN responders include harm from confused, violent, or rowdy victims" (New Dimension Guidance)
- Threat of panic
- Victims will need to be 'controlled'



Guidance on communication strategies

- Only one document outlines a communication strategy

Problems with current guidance

- People do not panic during disasters
- Disorderly behaviour normally results from conflict between two groups
- Strategies perceived as controlling and illegitimate could alienate crowd members and create disorder
- Belief in crowd disorder could lead responders to withhold relevant information from the public
- Reduced trust in responders and the information they provide could result in non-compliance

Review of decontamination exercises

- 10 out of 13 published exercises did not mention communication strategy
- Either assumed compliance, or assumed disorder

Findings highlight the lack of emphasis on communication

Future exercises

- Must test communication strategies
- Findings should be used to improve current communication plans
- Volunteers should be briefed to behave as realistically as possible



Conclusion

- Real-life incidents show that communication is vital
- Not reflected in guidance documents or exercises
- Responder perceptions could lead to disorder

Future research must:

- Understand how the public will behave during incidents involving decontamination, to challenge assumptions of non-compliance, and to create improved communication strategies.



