GOOD PRACTICES FOR PIOs (PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS)

1.0 Background

Public Information Officers (PIOs) are officers designated by the public authorities in all administrative units or offices under it to provide information to the citizens requesting for information under the Act. Any officer, whose assistance has been sought by the PIO for the proper discharge of his or her duties, shall render all assistance and for the purpose of contraventions of the provisions of this Act, such officer shall be treated as a PIO. And with the objectives:

- To review good practices to improve effectiveness of communications before, dring and after an emergency.

- How to apply these practices in planning communication for a radiological or nuclear emergency.

2.0 Review: Good communications practices.

2.1 Give people things they can do.

Communications should strive to give people a sense of control over their own well-being. Remembering that public perception of risk decreases when there is control over the risk, event response procedures should include actions the public may take, such as places people can go for care, actual physical steps people can take to protect themselves (shelter-in-place, iodine tablets, evacuation), or ways that people can get more information and stay informed of ongoing developments. Messages should stress this type of empowering options where feasible.

As the emergency evolves assessments may change or facts need to be updated. In order to reduce potential problems with consistency, which can lead to a loss of credibility and trust, if information must be changed, it should be clearly explained what has changed and why.

2.2 Don't delay the importance of framing.

First impressions of a situation are vital to all the perceptions of that situation which follows. Communications must take the initiative in framing what people know about the event or risk, essentially painting the first picture of the circumstance in people's minds, since that is the frame of reference against which all subsequent information will be compared.

Past experiences with radiological emergencies have shown that often the greatest drain on emergency medical resources is the "worried well"- people who seek medical attention when they have not been exposed. To reduce this likelihood, information about who is and who is not at risk must be clearly communicated. It should be noted that in the case of a terrorism involving radiation sources, public concern may be heightened by uncertainty about the potential for future incidents. Public information will need to plan how to deal with this increased anxiety in both the development of the information/messages and in how to communicate the information/messages.

That the information communicated is clear is widely understood, but often overlooked is the perspective and knowledge of the intended audience of the information. In developing any messages or other information products, the pre-existing knowledge about radiation of the target audience and their level of literacy must always be taken into account. Specific audience segments, such as seniors, children, the disabled, and non-native speakers, may need specific consideration. Newspapers are an excellent example of clear communications. They use simple grammatical structure, explain all technical or unfamiliar terms and put the important facts up front. Because radiation is unfamiliar to many, explanations of basic concepts should also be included to provide context and rationale for the information being communicated. Plain language explanations of many radiation and emergency response terminology have been developed by the IAEA.

In the preparedness phase it is helpful to have a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and answers prepared for likely questions in an emergency. This information can be used in different products, such as fact sheets, hand outs, prepared statements, etc.

Communication channels can be either controlled or uncontrolled. Those that are under control of an organization include: print material like flyers, brochures, etc; website information; advertising and public notices published in newspapers; public enquiry services and telephone hot lines for the public; and educational video and film products.

Channels through which an organisation could disseminate its messages, but are not under its control include: mass media—radio, television, newspapers, magazines; technical journals and other organization's websites; expert presentations (at meetings, public hearings, news conference, trainings, drills etc.); and channels that are completely informal or even not known (personal contacts and social networking sites--Face book).

Both types of channels will be used in an emergency, but it will be important to use the appropriate channel depending on the communications needs and audiences. For this reason, effective channels should be identified in advance of an emergency.

Technology has created new opportunities for rapid delivery of information during an emergency. Most organizations will already have a website and this can be a valuable communications channel during an emergency. Not only should it have a pre-existing content on radiation safety; it will be familiar to some audiences already. In addition to posting new information, websites can also allow visitors to sign up to receive updates by email, to enrol on listservs or to email specific questions. However, because of high demand during an emergency, the website will need to be robust, with sufficient bandwidth to handle high traffic volume. Downloading speeds for any information and alternative sites in case of service interruptions will also need to be considered.

The Internet has also revolutionized media relations. News releases can be posted to websites, photos and video footage can be made available to media, and officials can hold on-line Q&A sessions with the media. Internet-based social media offer even more options for communicating information both to the media and the public.

People will have a thirst for information and the Internet is a well used source of information, although not all of it correct. Authorities will need to monitor what is being posted because incorrect or misleading information could affect the implementation of emergency plans and countermeasures. This could be a significant task for a communications team and judgments will be required on the effort needed. Widespread use of mobile phones has also made it possible to broadcast text messages with emergency information to registered users.

3.0 Review: Learning from past practices.

During the response to the Fukushima accident, insufficient bandwidth caused long delays in communicating via the IAEA's web site and for the first three weeks, web site access was often not possible. This inaccessibility led to public criticism of the IAEA. For example, critics said the IAEA could not be expected to provide effective support in the accident's aftermath when the website couldn't remain visible.

In the event, the website would have required at least 45 times as much bandwidth as is normally required to be able to meet demand. To overcome the initial black-out period, all emergency content was posted on Facebook which remained visible without loss through the emergency period.

4.0 Putting practices into action.

Knowing the possible types of radiological emergencies are possible is important to consider in advance, when developing plans to respond to an emergency. Such information is usually available through regulatory authorities. Not only will this give the planner an idea of which technologies may be involved, but also the possible accident or emergency scenarios. While it will not be possible to plan for all possible scenarios, planning for the known uses of radiation will help prepare for an effective communications response.

Such information will guide the information to be prepared beforehand, such as which isotopes, technological processes and response and mitigation measures may be used. The public information officer will need to explain these concepts to the lay public in plain language. Planning in advance will reduce the amount of information that needs to be developed under crisis conditions.

The IAEA has developed threat categories for different types of nuclear and radiological technology that could result in an emergency. However the public information response to an emergency will not necessarily be dependent on these threat categories. As has been discussed previously, the public response to an emergency is due to other perception factors. It is none the less useful to be aware of these categories in planning public information activities as they can assist the planner be aware of specific impacts, duration, and response activities.

Emergency planning for category I is the most demanding, because the potential amount of radiation released in the event of an emergency could have widespread effects. Deterministic health effects occur immediately after exposure to a certain threshold dose of radiation. Examples of such effects include: reddening or burning of the skin, changes in bone marrow, sterility, and cataracts.

Planning and implementing the public information capability to handle category I emergencies should ensure that the capability exists to handle events of the other categories. However, not all countries have such facilities, so in practice, planning could be based on the highest threat category present within the country. This worse-case scenario planning approach will allow planners to be able to deal with the widest range of emergency scenarios.

What will need to be communicated and to whom.

- Technology to be explained is the nuclear power plant-type of plant-safety systems-regulations-what is known about the release and timing of arrival within the country.

- Isotopes that are known to be present in the plume

- Countermeasures, depending on severity of fallout, may include sheltering inside, restriction on consuming certain agricultural products

- Duration will be dependent on situation at the accident site and the prevailing weather, but deposition could take place over a period of days

- Affected audiences could be widespread or restricted to a certain region, depending on the weather. However, impact on agricultural products will be widespread

- Warning will be need to be issued to a widespread population through existing means, once timing for the fallout is established.

- Give people something they can do—prepare in advance for arrival of fallout, learn about how to prepare to shelter, assist neighbors and family]

How to plan for this communication.

- Duration of response—extended, from onset until well after contamination is deposited.

- Expected public information activities—media relations, media monitoring, Internet website information, information on protective measures, depending on timeframe—may include printed materials distributed to homes, meetings with likely to be affected communities, meetings with agricultural groups, warnings (through existing channels) closer to arrival of plume, public enquiry line, etc

- Facilities—location to provide media relations and hold public meetings

- Number of staff—may need to identify/recruit additional staff from other ministries or elsewhere in the organization beyond just the communications/public information office

- Supporting services—translation, printing, editing, media monitoring, website design, advertizing, telephone services, fascimile, computer support, etc.

- Roster of staff– identifying needed positions and skills required– recruiting staff from other government agencies to find numbers required- prepare staff for long hours and need to organize family obligations accordingly

- Training of staff for each position in the roster—in media relations, in responding to public, communications planning, plain language writing, html coding for the website, radiation basics.

- Shifts required—2 shifts initially 8 hours, but expect to move to 24/7 as plume approaches]

We will now examine how to plan for this communications by working through how the types of activities that might be needed, how they could be undertaken and by whom.

Most countries with nuclear power plants will have well established emergency plans for the operator, the local authorities and national authorities. These plans should be reviewed to develop the public information response plan. For those without such pre-existing plans, working through these elements will help you create a practical response plan to deal with the worst case scenario. If no such plan exists, use what is available as a starting point. For example, plans for hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, or other emergencies where large number of people may have to take protective measures could be adapted. The plan can also be further refined to consider other scenarios and particularly those situations where the location will be unknown.

It should be noted that the plan is just the guideline to be plan for as much as possible in advance. Because each emergency will be different, it will not be possible to know all possible scenarios and, of course, to anticipate the public reaction. Therefore the dynamic part of planning must happen during the actual emergency. This is when the risk communications process can be applied as the emergency unfolds– considering the circumstances, the perception factors, audiences channels, who talks and the action messages.

Standardized templates should be prepared in advance for all likely information products that may be required in the event of an emergency.

Holding Statement: for the initial stage of an emergency, when there is little information available, the organization responsible may need to issue a holding statement. The purpose of this statement is simply to advise the media/public that something has happened, who is responsible for dealing with it and when more information is expected to be available. A holding statement template should be developed, so that as soon as an emergency occurs, this basic information can be provided to the media/public.

A press release is issued when there are more details about the emergency available.

Media Advisories are used to notify the media about a news conference or media briefing that is to be held.

Templates for fact sheets that may be required should also be developed.

Sample templates for holding statements and press releases.

Emergency simulation exercises and drills should include communicating with the public and media. This is one of the most important, yet tends to be one of the least tested aspects of the

emergency response. Public Information staff should be involved in planning the exercise to make sure that it is a realistic test of plans, procedures and decision making processes relating to communications.

Public Information staff should participate in exercises and drills regularly as these can be extremely valuable in gaining experience about the demands that will be involved in communicating with the public and media during an emergency.

5.0 Opportunities to engage the media.

Proactive media relations should be used to engage the media and build good working relationships. Such activities are the subject of another presentation, but it is important here to underscore the importance of including the media wherever possible.

Whenever possible, the news media outlet should be invited to participate in emergency exercises as players or observers. Some may decline this invitation, stating their need to remain independent from agencies they report on. It may help to point out that the exercises could help them prepare for coverage of an event about which their staff will need to report.

Consideration can also be given to offering training to the media. This may be done as part of an activity at a facility using radiation (nuclear power plant, commercial irradiator, etc) to help demystify what is going on. Of course, inviting the media to participate in training may also arouse their interest to report.

These training sessions should provide resource materials to which editors can refer on the occasion of an event, or which reporters can take with them to the incident they have to cover. This material needs to be concise and relevant, for example short pocket guides or quick reference pocket cards. It should all include contact information for emergency response authorities.

6.0 Putting practices into action.

During the recovery phase the scale of the potential problems can be very different and will have to be taken into account.

In rural areas it is possible, but expensive, to decontaminate large areas but decisions may be made to restrict access rather than decontaminate. In city areas it may be similarly expensive to decontaminate or demolish buildings, remove topsoil and bury the debris. In general, the cost of the clean-up will largely be determined by the standards imposed by government; the higher the residual radiation allowed, the less costly the operation. The cost could be compounded by the loss of economic activity during clean-up and by people being reluctant to visit affected areas.

The process of decontamination should be discussed in detail, including variations in acceptable levels of contamination. There will be a clear need for detailed information on aspects of the situation and the communications issues about radiation risks will be substantial. However in the recovery phase there should be more time to prepare information and to engage the public if communication problems emerge.

Where possible information on radiation risks should be communicated by one authoritative organization, even if more than one is involved in the decontamination and recovery operation. A multi-agency response but one spokesperson on risks can establish clarity of communications with the public

All reasonable steps should be taken to assess exposure incurred by members of the public during the recovery phase, and the results of the assessments should be made publicly available.

The following factors will need to included in communications about the risks from the recovery phase

Describe the possible pathways by which people could be exposed to radiation from residual contamination and any necessary countermeasures

Estimates of radiation doses to people in recovery areas should be made using the best available data and updated regularly in light of monitoring.

Estimated radiation doses should be compared with doses from other sources of radiation, natural radiation and medical practices being helpful examples.

The risks from radiation exposure should be clearly explained, including acute and long term risks, in straightforward language.

It may be necessary to set up monitoring programmes, including for children, and the results should be published via a clear communications strategy.

People will want detailed results of their own radiation monitoring tests and what the results mean in terms of risk

People will want information on how they can protect themselves and their families

In rural areas, any food restrictions will need to be clearly explained along with any special considerations about animal welfare.

Food restrictions may last far longer than any other recovery countermeasure, because of the internal dose pathway. This needs to be clearly communicated, showing that while the external radiation dose may be trivial, but the internal dose may not be.

Information should be provided on the effectiveness of the clean-up measures.

When permitting people to return to affected areas, the level of any remaining contamination will need to be communicated and the risks acknowledged.

7.0 Conclusion

Remember: in order to ensure effective communication, you will only communicate better with people if you can think as they are thinking.