

Planning and Implementation of Risk Communication and Community Engagement Action Plan in the Battle against COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The Corona Virus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) outbreak attained pandemic status and has created a scare among the general community and the public health authorities. Risk Communication and Community Engagement have been identified as the essential and the integral component of the national emergency preparedness and response strategy. The entire communication process should target both the vulnerable population as well as the people who act as a representative or change agent in the community. The information which is delivered to the community should be decided on the basis of the need assessment of the vulnerable population and it should not be presumed that something is quite obvious and thus there is no need to focus on it. In conclusion, risk communication and community engagement are the crucial aspects of our preparedness and response in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. It is extremely important to establish the risk communication mechanism in the emergency response system and then follow-it up with proper planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities.

Keywords: COVID-19 outbreak, Risk communication, Community Engagement, World Health Organization

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak attained pandemic status and has created a scare among the general community and the public health authorities.^[1,2] The disease which started from a single city of China and was predominantly concentrated in the nation has gradually been detected in 216 nations and territories.^[1,2] The available estimates suggest that a total of 4,731,458 cases and 316,169 deaths have been reported worldwide, which amount to a case fatality rate of 6.68%.^[1]

SIGNIFICANCE OF RISK COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Even though all the essential domains (viz., case detection, treatment, isolation, contact tracing, and development of vaccines) need to be strengthened, it has been emphasized that the success of all these strategies will be determined by the extent of cooperation received from the general population.^[2,3] Thus, the component of Risk Communication

and Community Engagement (RCCE) is an essential and integral component of the national emergency preparedness and response strategy.^[4] The establishment of RCCE aids in meeting a wide range of intended objectives, namely ensuring access to essential information required to prevent acquisition of infection, enabling communication and feedback from the general population, aiding in timely detection of the cases and contact tracing, justifying the stand that government

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health authorities are the trustworthy source of information, clarifying the prevailing myths about the disease, informing the community about the health services' availability, and improving the extent of cooperation of the community in the planned measures.^[3-5]

SCOPE OF RCCE

In the overall context of the disease, meeting all these objectives by a single intervention is a huge bonus, nevertheless based on the availability of resources and the epidemiological situation of the disease, specific objectives can be prioritized by the health sector.^[5] The entire communication process should target both the vulnerable population and the people, who act as a representative or change agent in the community.^[2,4] The information which is delivered to the community should be decided on the basis of the need assessment of the vulnerable population, and it should not be presumed that something is quite obvious and thus there is no need to focus on it.^[3-5] This needs assessment can be done either via quantitative surveys or through the adoption of qualitative techniques such as focus group discussion or key informant interviews.^[5]

NECESSITY TO CUSTOMIZE RCCE

The delivered information should be adapted to the local settings and should aim to answer the questions of the audience and also sensitize them about the facts pertaining to the disease, especially with regard to the mode of transmission and the ways in which disease transmission can be prevented.^[3,5] However, it is very important that at no stage any information is delivered, which aggravates stigma or discrimination against any population groups. Finally, it is important to ensure that we succeed in reaching our target population and have the adequate capacity and financial support to implement the proposed plan.^[5] The authorities should be on the lookout to liaise with other sectors to enhance the effectiveness of the entire process

of RCCE.^[2,4,5] In addition, the entire process needs to be evaluated in terms of its effectiveness and the impact which it has produced in terms of improving the health-seeking behavior of the target audience. This impact can be measured in the form of reduction in case fatality rate, decline in the incidence of the new cases, spread of the disease to virgin areas, etc. In case of poor effectiveness, the strategy needs to be modified based on the inputs received from different stakeholders.^[3,5]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, RCCE are the crucial aspects of our preparedness and response in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. It is extremely important to establish the risk communication mechanism in the emergency response system and then follow it up with proper planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation activities.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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