

POLICY BRIEF

Risk Communication for Public Health Emergencies (PHEs): Working Together during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Increasing vaccine confidence

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Executive statement

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine has posed one of the biggest challenges in responding to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Risk Communication is undoubtedly a vital part of the vaccination campaigns. Promoting newly developed vaccines using the latest technology for a novel virus has presented unprecedented difficulties in implementing Risk Communication. The population's interest in the COVID-19 vaccine is extremely high due to its direct impact on their health and on society. We need to guide our population through an infodemic so that they can make the most suitable decision to protect their health. There is no single solution that fits all countries, yet there are some best practices and lessons learnt that each country could adapt to apply to their national context to increase vaccine confidence. This paper aims to provide key messages and a set of recommendations for ASEM Partners to implement effective Risk Communication amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, especially to complement their vaccination campaigns.

Key messages and recommendations

- **Ensure that your web page is recognised as a “single credible source”:** Having a reputable source of information, which is research-based and comprehensive, helps people access accurate information to increase vaccine confidence.
- **Healthcare workers are ambassadors to engage people:** Healthcare workers are an important part of our Risk Communication campaign for the COVID-19 vaccine. Don't forget to provide them with training and communication resources so that they can disseminate accurate information.
- **Anti-vaxxers or false vaccine information?:** Be aware of the types of misinformation circulating online. Debunk it. Your social media presence is also essential to detect/mitigate mis- and disinformation.
- **Reduce people's susceptibility to misinformation:** It is easier to promote “fresh beliefs” than change existing ones! Promote accurate information about COVID-19 vaccines before the population is exposed to false or misleading information.

Introduction

Vaccination plays a critical role in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. At the 73rd World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2020, a resolution was issued recognizing “the role of extensive immunization against COVID-19 as a global public good for health in preventing, containing and stopping transmission in order to bring the pandemic to an end, once safe, quality, efficacious, effective, accessible and affordable vaccines are available”¹. In 2019, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO identified “vaccine hesitancy” as one of the ten threats to global health², and the COVID-19 vaccine is not exempt from this phenomenon. The COVID-19 vaccines are fast-tracked in their development due to a public health emergency, yet the standards of quality, safety and efficacy are not compromised³.

¹ https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA73/A73_R1-en.pdf

² Vaccine hesitancy – the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines – threatens to reverse progress made in tackling vaccine-preventable diseases” <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>

³ <https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/human-regulatory/overview/public-health-threats/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/treatments-vaccines/vaccines-covid-19/covid-19-vaccines-development-evaluation-approval-monitoring>

“We all know that misinformation and disinformation pose a great risk to national vaccination efforts. They can lead to increase in vaccine hesitancy and in turn, reduce vaccination uptake. And this is nothing new. (...) But then the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how easily misinformation & disinformation spread online and how quickly new narratives can emerge and evolve, affecting prevention and control efforts”.

Ms Andrea WÜRZ, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)

[21 Oct 2021] ASEF PHN Annual Risk Communication Conference: Day 3 “How can we increase vaccine confidence?”

ASEF PHN hosted its annual Risk Communication conference online, looking into the role of Risk Communication in promoting “vaccine confidence” amid the COVID-19 pandemic. To facilitate a much-needed dialogue to overcome vaccine hesitancy and increase vaccine acceptance, the government officials and the officials from national/international public health organisations across Asia and Europe with first-hand experience in implementing COVID-19 vaccine risk communication shared their best practices and lessons learnt.

More information on the online conference can be found [here](#).



RISK COMMUNICATION FOR PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCIES: WORKING TOGETHER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Thursday 21 Oct 2021 | 16:00 – 17:30 SGT
How can we increase “vaccine confidence”?

Mr Maurice KELLY
Health Service Executive (HSE)
Ireland

Dr Tochimichi TANIGUCHI
Osaka University Hospital
Japan

Ms Andrea WÜRZ
European Centre for Disease
Prevention and Control (ECDC)

Dr Gini SHANKAR
Public Health Wales (PHW)
MODERATOR

Public Health Network
ASEF Public Health Network
<https://asef.org/themes/public-health/>

Recommendations from the online conference day 3

The online conference has highlighted some practical solutions for the challenges encountered during the COVID-19 vaccination campaigns and research-based strategies for Risk Communication across Asia and Europe.

Recommendation 1:

Increase vaccine confidence by guiding the population to a single credible source to disseminate accurate information.

A single credible source can be a government website set up for COVID-19, including the vaccination information. Having reputable resources will contribute to prevent a population from getting false information from untrusted sources such as individual postings on social media without evidence.



In Ireland, the Health Service Executive (HSE)* provided COVID-19 public information on its website. It is a single credible source of information in relation to the COVID-19 vaccine in Ireland, and everything the public needs to know is available there. The HSE Covid 19 information was widely promoted through PR, advertising and social media and recorded a huge amount of digital traffic. More than nine in ten eligible adults in Ireland have been fully vaccinated.

**HSE is the publicly funded healthcare system in Ireland.*

Recommendation 2:

Equip healthcare workers with correct, scientific and fact-based information – they are a trusted source of information for people.

People ask questions to healthcare workers, such as doctors, nurses and pharmacists, so make them as part of your communication campaign! They are the ones giving COVID-19 vaccinations to the population, and collaborating with them on vaccine Risk Communication will contribute to increase vaccine acceptance. It is extremely important to give them communication materials and provide them with trainings that support them in their conversations with patients.

Recommendation 3:

“Active listening” to understand the type of narratives circulating & audiences targeted online.

Your social media presence is vital so that you are not a stranger in the fight against COVID-19. Anti-vaxxers, including anti-vax doctors, also use social media to spread disinformation, and you need to know them and their arguments to debunk. Monitoring social media requires tools, techniques, human and technical capacities, so you need such resources. In some countries, the governments directly engage with the companies providing social networking services (SNS), and such SNS companies can take measures against the accounts spreading false information on COVID-19 vaccines. It can be controversial considering freedom of speech, but when it comes to the lives of the population, keeping the small groups of people unhappy might be an option in order to protect the majority from exposure to the mis- and disinformation that can harm population health.

Recommendation 4:

Use pre-emptive interventions to reduce people’s susceptibility to vaccine misinformation.

Enhance digital health and science literacy with a multi-stakeholder approach for pre-emptive interventions. Accurate information needs to be faster than false information, as it is more challenging to change one’s beliefs than promote new ones.

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What is Cov-Navi? An example from Japan.

Cov-Navi is a project through a non-profit organisation established in February 2021 to provide accurate information about COVID-19 and its vaccination. Cov-Navi means navigating COVID-19, and it is run by more than 30 professional volunteers, including clinical infectious disease specialists, scientists from virology, immunology and vaccine development, public health specialists and infectious disease mathematical modellers. Cov-Navi has its website and uses various social media platforms in engaging the public in Japan. A wide range of collaboration across different entities is one of the unique characteristics of Cov-Navi; they have a close relationship with the government, including the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), and at the same time, they also work with influencers of SNS such as YouTubers. For example, they provide information sessions to the Minister in charge of the COVID-19 vaccines about the related misinformation. The members of Cov-Navi also help MHLW create Q&A at their website. SNS, such as Twitter Japan, also cooperate with Cov-Navi. Cov-Navi was invited by YouTube to be a trusted flagger; Cov-Navi receives priorities when reporting accounts spreading misinformation related to the COVID-19 vaccine, and such accounts can be suspended. Direct collaboration with social media companies seems crucial with the battle against anti-vaxxers, especially anti-vax doctors using SNS.



<https://covnavi.jp/>

"If the public organisation or government cannot do this, Cov-Navi has to do it for the Japanese people!"

Acknowledgements

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References/more information

1. Countering online vaccine misinformation in the EU/EEA <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/countering-online-vaccine-misinformation-eu-eea>
2. Facilitating COVID-19 vaccination acceptance and uptake in the EU/EEA <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Facilitating-vaccination-uptake-in-the-EU-EEA.pdf>

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