Dioxin contamination in food lessons for NRO crisis communication

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Dioxins

- By-products of industrial and chemical processes
- Accumulate in the fat of animal species
- Persistent, with half-life of 7 to 11 years
- Approximately 90% of human exposure due to consumption of contaminated food
- Exposure to high levels
  - Short-term → skin lesions
  - Long-term exposure → increased risk of cancer
- Similarities with radioactivity
The Belgian dioxin crisis in 1999

- Jan - contamination occurred
- Feb - effects of contamination noticed
- Apr - reported to national authorities
- Apr - dioxin confirmed by analysis
- May - public informed
- May – European Commission informed
- May - withdrawal of contaminated foodstuffs from sale and export ban

The Irish dioxin crisis in 2008

- 28 Nov - Contamination identified during routine farm testing
- 1 Dec - Movement of animals restricted
- 2 Dec - Source of contaminated feed identified
- 4 Dec - Movements on other affected farms restricted and public informed
- 5 Dec – European Commission informed
- 6 Dec - All products manufactured between Sept and Dec recalled
- 7 Dec - Press statement – “no adverse health effects”
- 11 Dec - Products returned to market
Effective crisis management

- Timely public communication
- Acknowledgement of real and perceived risks
- Control of stigma

Timely public communication

Belgian crisis: one month delay led to
- allegations of cover-up
- accusations of serving economic rather than public health interests
- blame directed at Government

Irish crisis: prompt communication led to
- sense that crisis was being managed
- trust that problem would be resolved
Timely public communication

- Establishes credibility in the organisation providing the information
- Helps shape public attitudes towards the risk
- Sets the pace for resolution of the problem

Acknowledgement of real and perceived risks

Belgian crisis
- Uncertainty about real extent of contamination
- Authorities projected confidence and optimism
- Disagreement between EC and Belgian authorities in assessing the risk

Irish crisis
- Uncertainty about real extent of contamination
- Clear statement of risk assessment issued by Food Safety Authority of Ireland
Acknowledgement of real and perceived risks

- Essential for building trust and credibility
- Communicators need to understand what people know and believe
- Communication is undermined by denying real risks
- Also by ignoring non-risks perceived by the public as real risks

Control of stigma

Belgian crisis
- Media conveyed the risk as unacceptable rather than focussing on the risk of actual exposures
- Information website and call centre established, but too late

Irish crisis
- Authorities provided detailed information about the actual risks ....
- And about efforts to reduce the risk to public health
Control of stigma

- Poorly understood risks are not readily accepted so accessible, understandable information must be provided
- Stigma can be reduced by clearly explaining efforts to reduce the risk, and levels of uncertainty
- Media has a large influence on public perception of seriousness of crisis
- Effective crisis management can exert a positive influence on the media

Lessons for crisis communication

- Risk assessment
- Risk management and decision making
- Communicating risk and public information
- Public concerns
- The international dimension
Risk Assessment

- Plan for a range of scenarios, including for low probability/high consequence events
- Maintain rapid and effective surveillance systems
- Ensure risk assessments are based on good science
- Include all relevant bodies

Risk Management and Decision Making

- Ensure clear leadership at all stages
- Coordinate effectively between all agencies
- Establish a credible, open and responsive regulatory system
- Think “worst case scenario” (better to relax a ban than to extend it)

Communicating risk, public information and public concerns

- Include public information as an integral part of all emergency plans
- Provide as much detail as possible about the nature of risk, what is still unknown and efforts to reduce uncertainty
- Decide in advance the list of issues to be covered in early news conferences
- Agree appropriate experts in advance
- Ensure consistency of message
- Address real and perceived risks
- Ensure that actions match words
The international dimension

- Keep neighbouring countries fully informed of developments
- Use appropriate international communication channels
- Assist international organisations in their risk assessments
- Where possible, use internationally agreed limits