

Risk communication: a critical building block in veterinary education

Stucke O.¹, Bertrand-Ferrandis C.²

1 WHO, Risk Communication Capacity Building Technical Officer. stuckeo@who.int

2 OIE, Head of the Communication Unit. c.bertrand-ferrandis@oie.int

In an era of globalisation and rapid circulation of goods, people, animal products, and live animals, effective communication has become ever more important. Progress in information technology and transformation in the way people access information has increased the demands on experts and officials to communicate clearly, quickly and credibly. In this paper, the authors argue that communication skills – and in particular risk communication skills – are becoming ever more critical, and advocate for a better inclusion of risk communication curriculum into initial and continuous veterinary education. The paper also briefly explains how OIE and WHO can assist with this effort.

Veterinarians' primary role is the improvement of animal health and welfare. Traditionally, the exercise of this role relied on technical knowledge and expertise, and a relatively direct exchange of information within a small circle of animal health stakeholders. Veterinary education rightly responded to the requirements of the job profile with curricula and courses primarily in the field of "hard science" (biochemistry, genetics, anatomy, etc.), and complemented these with some "social-science" knowledge.

However, the current "knowledge mix" may need to be reviewed. The authors see three interlinked factors for that:

(1) Changes to the economy of information:

The way citizens access and contribute to the flow of information has changed completely. Rumours, opinion, and perceptions circulate faster than ever and traditional, professional journalism is in strong competition with other sources of information. Audiences have become accustomed to immediate answers and to being informed 24h a day;

(2) Continued Globalisation:

The rapid circulation of goods, people, animal products and live animals means that protective animal health and welfare measures are no longer the exclusive domain of closely defined, local groups of stakeholders. The exchange of information on animal health risks and issues now involves sectors beyond veterinary and public health and takes place across borders.

(3) Heightened awareness of biological threats:

Concerns about emerging pathogens have been amplified through the surge of terrorism and the associated risk of biological science being misused to cause harm. Biological threats are, therefore, much higher on agendas and attract great interest from all audiences, and no longer just from technical experts.

As a consequence, to carry out their duties today, veterinarians' need to exchange information and communicate with more stakeholders and audiences, and expectations of information consumers are more demanding than ever before. Therefore, veterinarians need to be able to clearly identify their communication objectives, to assess and understand the expectations and perceptions of their audiences, and to ensure consistency and adequacy of their messages in order to create trust and to obtain the engagement required for the performance of their technical role.

The OIE *Veterinary Education Core Curriculum Guidelines* recommend that the subject of communication be part of any veterinary education. The OIE *Recommendations on the Competencies of Graduating Veterinarians* require graduates to be able to:

*" – communicate technical information in a way that the general public can understand;
– communicate effectively with fellow health professionals to exchange scientific and technical information and practical experience."*¹

¹ OIE recommendations on the Competencies of graduating veterinarians ('Day 1 graduates') to assure National Veterinary Services of quality (2012) ; p.9

Furthermore, the *Day-One-Competencies* foresee that veterinarians working in Veterinary Authorities have appropriate risk communication skills.

In line with this, all veterinarians need to be equipped with the basic skills and tools to respond directly to increased demand for immediate expert advice and need to be trained to listen, acknowledge, and respond appropriately to concerns voiced by populations and stakeholders. “Soft skills” to ensure collaboration with key stakeholders and concerned publics outside the animal health sector and an ability to contribute informed animal and public health advice to the constant flow of information are required.

Veterinarians need to be capacitated for this during undergraduate and through continuing education. Dedicated series of classes that address communication and particularly risk communication skills are required early on in the VEE curriculum, and should be exercised in relevant classes throughout the studies.

Aware of the challenge that these demands pose on educational actors, OIE and WHO have joined forces to facilitate this educational shift in four ways:

- (1) A communication handbook dedicated to the Veterinary Services was recently published by the OIE. The handbook guides veterinarians on how to quickly identify and address perceptions, beliefs, rumours and misinformation. It prepares them for the dissemination of timely, credible, easy to understand and trustworthy information. This handbook was developed thanks to the adaptation of the basic risk communication training curriculum and handbook created by WHO for public health workers. These tools help building common essential communication and risk communication skills particularly helpful for outbreaks and epidemics, when the two sectors must harmonise their communication on hazards, on the nature and magnitude of risks and vulnerabilities, and on actions to be taken to control crises. Used within a One Health approach, these tools will allow coordinated advice of both human and animal sectors and thus minimise the loss of lives, economic, and social loss due to disease;
- (2) The Day-1-Competencies state that veterinarians need to be able to communicate technical information to the general public and amongst fellow health professionals. While this may sound straight-forward, this will not always be the case. WHO has been made painfully aware of this during the Ebola crisis: health information and advice that seemed to be clear and accessible to the “general public” was not followed by affected populations as it conflicted with local customs, beliefs, and perceptions. Extra efforts are therefore being made to identify ways of building trust in health advice in all population groups, and not just the “general public”.

To support veterinarians’ risk communication efforts, joint work between OIE and WHO is underway “translating” technical knowledge into accessible formats and language that can be understood and acted upon by broad groups of stakeholders. Furthermore, ways are being explored on how best to integrate collaboration with scientists, such as sociologists and anthropologists into such risk communication efforts.

- (3) To support continued education efforts and to reach as many practitioners as possible, we are investing in the use of new technologies and are building-up dissemination platforms. Starting with the materials mentioned above OIE-WHO guidance and learning materials, will be made available to seasoned practitioners and students through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).
- (4) Scientific research into risk communication experience and principles is key for formalising and improving risk communication practices. For this reason, work on a peer-reviewed WHO Guideline is underway. The Guideline seeks to establish a scientific basis that will help the integration of risk communication into public health university educational curricula. Once completed, the Guideline will be adapted to the animal health context in collaboration with the OIE.