

Suggestions to the media to help us cope with the A/H7N9 crisis in China

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Summary The A/H7N9 avian influenza virus sparked global concerns about public health. The media published numerous reports about emerging infectious diseases, including their clinical characteristics and genomic information. However, outbreaks of A/H7N9 posed a real challenge to China's emergency management and especially its dealing with the media. This study analyzes ways to deal with the media during A/H7N9 crises and it proposes a shift in public emergency management from an "Impact-Responsive" approach to a "Prevention-Active" approach. A "Prevention-Active" approach should be used when dealing with the media during subsequent outbreaks.

Keywords: Infectious diseases, avian influenza, media

Since January 2014, some provinces and cities in China have seen continued cases of H7N9 avian influenza. Experts believe that sporadic cases will continue to appear in some cities. This has sparked global public health concerns. Last year, the mass media produced many reports describing this new emerging infectious disease, including its clinical characteristics and genomic information (Figure 1). Outbreaks of A/H7N9 posed a real challenge to China's emergency management, and especially its dealings with the media. Questioners often ask "Will A/H7N9 ultimately prove to be controllable? Will it remain limited to animals? Or will it, like the A/H1N1 virus, adapt to humans and cause a pandemic?" My colleagues and I believe that A/H7N9 has many of the traits that make a new flu virus worrisome. Nevertheless, the fine line between foresight and alarmism can only be accurately drawn in retrospect, and we still have long way to go in terms of developing methods to combat this type of emerging infectious disease. Three aspects should be apparent when assembling information (Figure 2).

China has created a public emergency management system. However, we are mindful that in combating emerging infectious diseases, one of our aims is to

gain public confidence through understanding and thus limit public panic. The media play a crucial role in this process. We have shifted from an "Impact-Responsive" approach to mass media, *i.e.* highlighting the response once an incident has occurred, to a "Prevention-Active"

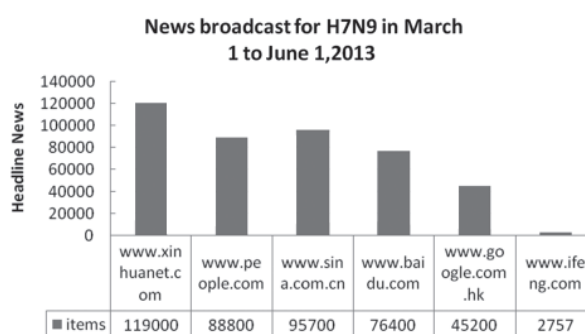


Figure 1. Headline news about H7N9 in major mass media during the crisis from March 1 to June 1, 2013.

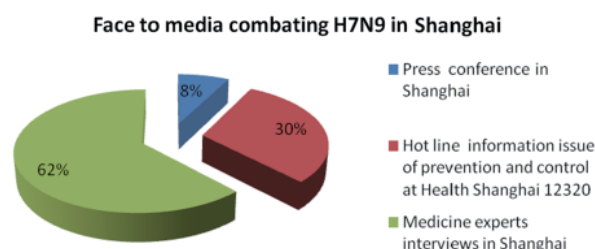


Figure 2. Dealing with the media during the H7N9 crisis in Shanghai in 2013.

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approach, *i.e.* highlighting active prevention and an active response. Emerging infectious diseases (EIDs) are defined as infectious diseases with an incidence that has increased over the past 35 years and that may increase in the near future. These diseases account for about 12% of all human infections due to pathogenic microbes. More emerging infectious diseases will strike in the future. We have a number of tools at our disposal, and one is mass media. The media has a huge impact! The crisis of A/H7N9 avian influenza last year gave us a chance to experience this first-hand. We must capitalize on the media when a similar crisis occurs in the future. Clearly, interaction between the health system and mass media has become more important with the development of modern reporting technology. This prompts suggestions regarding how we deal with the media in the face of the A/H7N9 crisis. We offer suggestions to the media to help us cope with the H7N9 crisis in China.

During the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic, laboratory scientists and physicians lacked unity, they failed to take advantage of scientific research on SARS, and they lost the confidence of mass media (1-3). But substantial progress in this respect has been made during the A/H7N9 crisis, as documented by the New England Journal of Medicine (4). Our report was posted as a Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) and was released early on the US Center for Disease Control's (CDC) website (<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr>). Epidemiologic notes and reports and updated editorial notes from the US CDC offer constant reminders. The World Health Organization issued a Guidance Document on "Clinical management of severe acute respiratory infections when H7N9 influenza is suspected: What to do and what not to do". Sharing of data on clinical features and treatment of patients is essential to improving understanding of a disease and to refining optimal case management. These steps are termed "Crisis Communication". However, we are always mindful of SARS, for which we paid a very heavy and painful price 10 years ago (5). One aim of combating emerging infectious diseases is to gain public confidence and thus limit public panic. The media play an important role in this process. Over

the past few years, many more influenza strains that are capable of infecting humans have emerged (6,7). So how should we deal with the media? We must be diligent. News management is crucial in the event of a public health crisis. Mass media has greatly affected crises and impacted peoples' everyday lives, the social order, and even the power of government (8,9). We have learned lessons from news management during the SARS crisis and so has China's mass media, as shown by its commendable efforts during the recent epidemic.

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