Ebola Crisis Communication Plan for Health Care Entities

On September 30, 2014, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) diagnosed the first case of Ebola in the United States, with the person having traveled to Dallas, Texas from West Africa. The patient did not have symptoms upon leaving Africa, but developed symptoms approximately five days after arriving in the U.S.

On October 12, 2014 a nurse who had been an active part of the patient’s care team, was also confirmed to have contracted Ebola. Because she utilized personal protective equipment (PPE) during her interactions with the patient, the infection is thought to have been transmitted as she was removing her PPE.

While the CDC maintains that a full-blown U.S. outbreak is unlikely, health care organizations must consider strategies to prepare and safeguard their employees, patients and the public should an Ebola patient seek treatment at their facility. Furthermore, health care entities will be on the front lines of communication with the public and will have a principal role in maintaining a sense of calm in the community.

What to Do Now

- **Create an internal communication plan:** a process for reaching employees through combinations of emails, intranet postings, flyers/posters, leader talking points, FAQs or a website situation room. The plan should identify simple, key messages, a reliable process and the vehicles for providing continual updates and collecting feedback from employees.

- **Create an external communication plan:** a process for reaching external stakeholders, customers, media, shareholders, suppliers, local community, health care providers, analysts, retirees, union representatives, etc.

What to Say to Employees

- **State the Facts:** Connect employees to timely, accurate information from CDC, WHO and your State and County Health Departments. Provide clear instructions about what to do if employees suspect that a patient may have Ebola and also what to do if they believe they have been exposed to Ebola.

- **Outline safety protocols and describe how employees will learn and practice those protocols:** Clearly articulate and communicate preventive actions the organization is taking to avert or contain transmission of Ebola at work. Focus on initial and refresher training for the correct donning and doffing of PPE; Protocols for patient isolation; Enhanced hygiene and cleaning procedures; biohazard disposal; disposal of contaminated remains.

- **Continually demystify the fear:** Continually communicate refreshed facts from authoritative resources on how Ebola is spread and how to avoid infection. Utilize new and different media to broadcast messages about the importance and effectiveness of hospital safety measures (e.g., isolation, personal protective equipment, etc.).

What to Say to the Community

- **State the facts:** Without violating patient confidentiality, describe the situation at hand. Communicate the hospital’s Ebola safety precautions and that hospital remains a safe place for non-Ebola patients. Discuss contact tracing efforts and enlist community cooperation.

- **Outline safety steps that the hospital is taking to keep employees and the community safe:** Ensure that community members know when and where to seek care if they believe that they are sick. Describe how medical waste is handled within the hospital and what happens to this waste when it leaves the hospital.

- **Continually demystify the fear:** Communicate facts from authoritative resources about the communicability of Ebola within the community at large. Compare the transmissibility of Ebola to that of HIV or the common cold to de-escalate panic.

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Contact your Aon account representative or consultant for support in developing your crisis response and in organizing, preparing and implementing your crisis communication plan. Aon crisis communication consultants are prepared to help you develop and implement your plan.
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