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Risk communication at the time of Coronavirus: are we washing our hand of COVID-19?

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As the tide of Covid-19 flood the world, health authorities are implementing a number of measures that have deeply changed the way people live. However, there is no shared consensus on how to communicate to the public what is happening, and why these extreme interventions are needed. Instead, people received in the latest weeks contrasting messages from the different actors involved in the fight against Coronavirus.

Nevertheless, risk communication represents a key factor and is part of the response to any emergency or to the rise of any hazard affecting human health (1).

In Italy, as of the 27th of March 2020, the first country in the world for number of deaths ascribed to Covid-19, public health authorities have implemented drastic measures to reduce the spread of the virus. At the same time, different voices are sending uncontrolled and contrasting messages to the population. This is consistent with what is happening worldwide: whilst some official voices

trivialized the nature of the disease, labelling this epidemic as “a little bit like the flu”(2), other presented a catastrophic scenario, with SARS-CoV-2 dubbed as “public enemy number one” (3).

Besides, it appears that there is no shared consensus also among the experts on how to share knowledge, or the lack of it, with the people.

With no common restraint tactics and no risk communication plans in place, hand-washing seems to be one of the sole measures everyone agreed upon. Yet, is washing hand – a solution Semmelweis suggested 150 years ago (4) – our best answer to the infection?

Is therefore the public perception of what is happening distorted? Who are the professionals intitled to speak to the people? Are the voices of the experts and of the politicians so relevant that they can bypass a properly designed strategy of risk communication? Above all, is there such a strategy in place, both at local and at international level?

Moreover, what an expert is remain controversial: a virologist, may not be competent in epidemiology, public health, risk and crisis management, scientific communication and above all risk communication. This same reasoning applies to other professionals involved in the management of this outbreak. In addition, epidemiologists, virologists and especially institutions are deaf to the voice of those who fight on the front lines as emergency doctors, general practitioners or clinicians, pretending that the decision-making process in the battle against the virus is their exclusive prerogative.

Yet, different, unsolicited opinions are striking the media, offering a chaotic overview to the public, and risking to undermine the effects of the public health measures on the one hand, and to create uncontrollable panic on the other.

As we asserted in a previous publication (5), risk communication remains a key part in the fight against environmental health.

We have the duty to explain clearly what is happening, what the possible scenarios are, and why some measures, however unpopular, are needed. Risk communication is not a solo, of course. On the contrary, it should be a choir of coordinated, trustworthy voices.

Finally, the good practice in the management of mass critical events and catastrophe medicine highlights the need of strategies for emergency preparedness (6). A plan should always be in place and when an emergency is foreseen should be made available to the population as soon as possible.

Different strategies should be ready graded according to a scale where all the possible scenario, from mild to catastrophic, are considered. The effectiveness of the implemented model should be verified in a continuous feedback process. Moreover, the message should be delivered using suitable technical solutions taking into account the different targets, the safety and confidentiality of the contents, the forwarding speed, the ease of use, and senders’ reliability. Data sharing should be appropriate, and there must be a worldwide consensus on definitions and on what the numbers presented to the public – like the number of deaths for Covid-19 or that of confirmed cases – represent.

This delicate phase of information also has ethical and legal implications and directly affects people’s right to know and to act consequently for their own and the collectivity’s sake.

We therefore call for the urgent creation of an International Crisis Management Unit aimed to implement a global, coordinated, top-to-bottom risk communication plan, coherent with what measures have been taken and will be taken in the future.

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