

How to talk about epidemics: the TellMe project

Zadig

TELL ME is a three-years European Collaborative Project aimed to develop original communication strategies to be employed during infectious disease crises. On November 9th 2012, a workshop has been held in Rome to validate the project's first findings, which were focused on the analysis of population behaviour during infectious diseases outbreaks.

TELL ME – Transparent communication in Epidemics: Learning Lessons from experience, delivering effective Messages, providing Evidence – is a 36 months Collaborative Project, whose purpose is to provide evidence and to develop models for improved risk communication during infectious disease crises. By combining public health, social sciences, behavioural sciences, political sciences, law, ethics, communication and media, TELL ME aims to elaborate new and effective strategies that allow to deal with the uncertainties and challenges of risk communication during epidemic outbreak.

The three main tasks of the project are to understand how public health communicators should instruct the population about effective preventative actions, like hygienic norms or vaccination; to identify the most appropriate communication methods to deal with complexity, uncertainty, ignorance and all the different shades of misinformation; to develop the best communication strategies to support vaccination campaign, both by informing population and assisting healthcare professionals.

In order to pursue these objectives, it is firstly fundamental to learn from past experiences by collecting and assessing evidence about population behavioural response to previous infectious diseases outbreaks. At the same time, it is important to understand how communication may change behaviours and what are the new challenges and methods concerning outbreak communication. TELL ME aims to address the role of stakeholders and social media, the health care professional communication requirements and the digital resources for disease detection. Also, risk communication should not be restricted to emergencies but is also crucial before (to improve prevention) and after (to keep track of previous issues) an epidemic outbreak. Regarding predictability, a powerful tool will be the prototype of a computational method that TELL ME is going to develop; this model will allow to simulate the actions and interactions of autonomous decision-making entities within a virtual environment during an epidemic outbreak, in order to observe the emergence of effects at the macro level. Great attention will also be given to support vaccine uptake; discontinuous or malicious information and false alarms led to a diffused distrust towards vaccines, which has grown stronger in the last years. New approaches need to be developed to contrast this lack of information with clarity and honesty. Obviously, any finding and outcomes of such a project, with a special attention to any future “take up” activity that could be generated, need to be spread by any means possible: web 2.0, mass media, TV networks, radios, research papers, conference presentations and other most effective communication channels.

As stated above, studying past cases of epidemic and pandemic outbreaks to analyze population behaviour is a first, necessary step in order to pursue all these objectives; such a topic was the core of the first Work Package (WP1) of the TELL ME project and its findings has been recently validated in a workshop that took place in Rome, on November 9th, at the Hotel NH Leonardo da Vinci. The WP1, led by National Centre For Epidemiology, Surveillance And Health Promotion – CNESPS (Italy), produced six documents, one for each of the six objectives of the WP1: a systematic review of studies addressing population behaviour during infectious outbreaks and review of outbreak communication in 2009 pandemic; a review of components and issues of outbreak communication; an analysis of segmentation and specific communication needs of target groups; a report on report on vaccine acceptance/refusal to vaccination; a study on narratives and Urban Myths surrounding epidemics and vaccination; an analysis of the salient issues about human rights, stigmatization and risk of discrimination against specific population segments and target groups. All those documents are freely available on the project website.

The next step consists in the identification of the new challenges concerning outbreak communication: role of stakeholder and health care professionals, effectiveness of communication through social media, new social resources for epidemiological surveillance. In parallel, the TELL ME project will continue to keep track of every news regarding epidemics and pandemics, promptly reporting any information about new cases of infectious disease outbreaks, relevant advances in medical research and emerging strategies of risk communication.

Related information

Programmes

- FP7-HEALTH

Countries

- Belgium, France, Israel, Italy, Latvia, United Kingdom

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