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THE EFFECTIVE USE OF THE MEDIA DURING AN INFECTIOUS DISEASE EMERGENCY

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During an infectious disease emergency such as a pandemic of influenza, the media will play a critical role in disseminating public health information. Timely and accurate information can help facilitate coordination and cooperation within the community, reduce speculation and fear and maintain public confidence in the health system. The media can also actively assist public health responses by providing the public with advice on how to remain well and by telling people what they can do if they suspect they have the disease or have been in close contact with others who have it. In recognition of the important role of the media and other forms of communication during infectious disease emergencies, NSW Health is developing a communication strategy for infectious disease emergencies, based on recommendations from the 2004 NSW Taskforce on Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (chaired by Professor Ron Penny).¹ With respect to public communication, the strategy will aim to ensure a constant flow of accurate information to the media, as an absence of information is likely to quickly result in speculation and misinformation.

While the strategy is still being developed, key features of the media component include:

- providing clear and simple messages based on advice from NSW Health and other appropriate agencies (for example, the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing or, during the recovery phase of a pandemic, the NSW Department of Community Services)
- using a constant media face and identifying alternative spokespersons to engage the media when public health experts are not available. The chosen spokesperson(s)

should be knowledgeable and authoritative and should provide consistent messages and facts

- providing media groups with telephone numbers for media information services so that they do not flood emergency services lines
- providing media statements, fact sheets and interviews as soon as possible after an outbreak is notified and then on a regular basis, each day
- utilising pre-existing resources and structures (for example, pre-existing websites and fact sheets) for the dissemination of public health information, and developing new resources where appropriate
- establishing a 1800 information line where recorded news releases are available and updated regularly
- establishing a dedicated website that provides timely information about the emergency
- using varied forms of media in addition to mainstream media (media releases and interviews)—for example, web-based information on the intranet and Internet
- encouraging the media to appropriately balance their responsibility for reporting news and events versus their role as providers of information during what will be a complex emergency
- recognising that media plans should cover different stages of an infectious disease emergency—recognising, for example, that media information is vital not only during the height of a pandemic, but also during the longer-term recovery phase when it can help ensure that patients and their families or relatives receive all available assistance and that people resume their normal lives as soon as possible after the outbreak.

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