LETTERS TO EDITOR

MEDIA RESPONSE TO DISASTER

Sir,

Supe et al., in their article on experiences of response of health services during disasters said very little about the way the press was handled.[1] However in the present era mass media play an important role in disaster management. Lots of channels are now available before and during disasters - e.g. visible or audible, leaflets, mobiles and other sources of mass media such as newspapers, television, radio and - increasingly important - the Internet.[2] Dealing with mass media is crucial as it provides easy access to a large audience and media can work even in cases of a complete or partial breakdown of the routine services. Sometimes media hype, which is media-generated news waves reinforce over and over again one specific frame while ignoring other perspectives. Such news waves can fuel fear and anxiety among people involved in one way or another in the aftermath of disasters.[3,4] People tend to adopt the explanations offered by the media and integrate them into their story about their own health complaints. Media also play a positive role in the aftermath of disasters by informing, educating, or communicating with the people.

Basic work of media during disaster as perceived by International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR):

- Information: Media have to inform the public about the disaster as per the information needs of the audience.
- Public arena: Media in democracies are expected to establish an arena for public political debate. This calls for balanced reporting (covering both sides of a controversial issue) and the inclusion of sources with different opinions rather than just reliance on one “official” or “expert” source.
- Watchdog: They have to keep a critical eye on those in power. Investigative reporting, uncovering of scandals and proving failures of decision-makers are what most journalists dream of. This “watchdog function” of the media often leads to a skeptical attitude as default.

As suggested by ISDR the following suggestions may be helpful in stimulating reflection to increase the likelihood of reasonable disaster coverage:[2]

- Communicate relevant points - or journalists will find other sources or other angles sources easily available and provide information needed to report on “your” topic.
- Take into account the demands and operation rules of the media and use them to get your message across. Rather than fighting the professional rules of journalism sources one should try to adapt their message to these rules.
- Establish cooperation with (local) media to increase disaster knowledge and awareness among the threatened population.
- Prepare for communication and cooperation with the media during acute disasters.
- Start a dialogue with the media and negotiate rules for reporting during acute disasters with them. Disaster management should seek contacts with the media before
acute disasters occur in order to establish a working relationship.

In a meta analysis of media and disaster it was observed that when the media and public health professionals work closely together, informing and educating the public with accurate information, beneficial effects can be achieved and the wellbeing of the disaster community can be enhanced. However, only a few studies actually examined associations between the media and health problems following disasters. Therefore, more studies that explicitly examine the role of the media in the aftermath of disasters are encouraged.

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