

Crisis Management: Responding Effectively to Media Inquiries

Whether the story concerns a potential epidemic, an adverse event or regulatory scrutiny, healthcare organizations are often in the headlines. At such times, leadership must be ready to respond to inquiries from a variety of media outlets. Public perception of an organization may depend on the ability to skillfully manage these media encounters and stay a step ahead of damaging news and social media accounts.

Preparation, coordination, candor and follow-through are the essential components of an effective media strategy. This edition of *AlertBulletin*® is designed to help healthcare leaders communicate in a clear, accurate and timely manner during a crisis.

PREPARATORY MEASURES

The following recommendations should be implemented before an incident occurs and the media inquiries begin:

Establish a crisis management task force. The team – representing such areas as administration, public relations, marketing and communication, medical staff, nursing, ancillary departments, security, risk management and legal – is responsible for anticipating worst-case scenarios, developing and implementing the crisis management plan, and reviewing emergency protocols on an annual basis.

The team's preparatory duties include:

- *Identifying major risks* and developing strategies to address hazards, calm fears, minimize losses and expedite recovery.
- *Creating crisis management and communication policies and procedures* that enhance access to senior leaders and reinforce the chain of command.
- *Conducting simulations of crisis situations*, including team exercises, organization-wide drills, and internal and external testing of mock social media messages.
- *Developing an emergency database of contacts and resources*, such as media outlets, government offices, nonprofit agencies and crisis management consultants.

- *Compiling a list of all available methods of communication*, including the organizational website, patient portals, social media sites, and emergency e-mail and text messaging capabilities. (Be sure to establish a presence in social media platforms well before a crisis occurs.)

In addition, the crisis management team should address such concerns as evacuation and crowd control, data and record protection, insurance coverage and post-event continuity of operations. (See the CNA resource, [“Emergency Management Planning: Assessing the Risks, Preparing for Recovery.”](#))

Appoint a capable spokesperson. The crisis management team should designate a primary media contact and an emergency backup, both of whom are authorized by the governing body to speak on behalf of the organization. To properly execute this responsibility, the spokespersons should be:

- *Of sufficient rank in the organization* to serve as authoritative and credible sources.
- *Accessible on a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week basis* during the entire crisis period.
- *Knowledgeable about medical and legal issues*, with ready access to in-house and outside experts, including a designated board member.
- *Verbally adept*, with strong listening and extemporaneous speaking skills.
- *Temperamentally suitable*, with a confident and professional demeanor and the ability to face difficult questions calmly.

QUICK LINKS

- Neisloss, S. [“Managing Your Hospital’s Reputation.”](#) *Hospitals and Health Networks*, posted September 18, 2004.
- [Tools for Crisis Management.](#) Institute for Healthcare Improvement.
- Wright, I. [“9 Tips for Effectively Using Social Media During a Health Crisis.”](#) *PRNews*, posted August 3, 2016.

Draft a general media response. By crafting a template for media messages, the team can ensure that verbal and written responses consistently reflect the four key phases of a crisis action plan:

1. Full investigation of events.
2. Thorough review of established facts.
3. Accurate and timely communication of findings.
4. Prompt and decisive action to address issues that have come to light.

Such a strategy conveys to reporters that organizational leaders remain in control, even during challenging circumstances.

Educate staff. Employees, contracted personnel and volunteers should be conversant with the organization's media-related policies, procedures and protocols. Instruct staff and volunteers to respectfully but firmly direct all media inquiries to the authorized spokesperson or an organizational website. Explain that this policy protects patients and staff members from harassment, distraction and potential loss of privacy. In addition, remind employees that all patient information is to be discussed only in the context of providing care, and that indiscreet comments may breed rumors or compromise patient confidentiality.

Manage access to social media accounts. Posting updates to social media brand accounts should be limited to knowledgeable social media managers who are specially trained in message content and moderation guidelines. All messages should be compliant with [HIPAA](#) and the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#) social media draft guidelines.

Strictly prohibit employees from posting personal messages on social media brand accounts. In addition, organizational protocols should address disciplinary measures for when employees disclose hospital-related business in personal postings on private social media tools.

Failing to have a presence in social media communities or overlooking adverse social media postings during a crisis may result in untold damage to an organization's reputation.

DURING THE CRISIS

Identify critical talking points. Once a crisis occurs, the team must agree upon the essential information to communicate via media releases, digital messaging and online postings. Issues that are unresolved should not be discussed with the media. However, the team should be prepared to respond when media outlets uncover investigative findings prematurely.

Focus on the primary audience. Determine which groups (such as patients, staff, community members or others) are most affected by the situation, and direct core messages to their questions and concerns. Provide an action plan outlining the steps the organization plans to take to address the situation, both in the short- and long-term range. In the event of a patient injury, ensure that the patient/family receives information firsthand from the organization, not the media. If a lawsuit filing brings media attention, consult with legal counsel prior to disclosing any information.

Anticipate media questions. Thorough preparation is integral to sound communication in a crisis. Before addressing media representatives, the spokesperson should work with the task force to formulate anticipated questions and appropriate responses. Answers should be brief, factual and to the point.

Monitor social media channels. Failing to have a presence in social media communities or overlooking adverse social media postings during a crisis may result in untold damage to the organization's reputation. By utilizing recognized social media listening tools, personnel can detect negative messaging before it widely disseminates within the social stratosphere. When false rumors circulate, post statements that provide links to accurate facts.

Be forthcoming. An emphasis on accountability and transparency can help restore organizational credibility following a systems failure or medical error. Reluctance to divulge relevant facts will generate rumors and intensify media scrutiny, potentially turning a manageable incident into a full-blown media crisis. All information shared with the public should be thoroughly reviewed for accuracy, completeness and compliance with confidentiality safeguards. If apologies are necessary, they should be delivered in a sincere and straightforward manner.

Maintain ongoing communication with staff. Ensure that staff members understand what has occurred and the steps that have been taken to address the crisis. Regular updates via text messages and website postings can help allay concerns and maintain a two-way communication channel. Forewarn staff that reporters may present themselves as a relative or other trusted person in order to engage an employee in improper discussion of the event.

Emphasize the positive. When managing sensitive topics, such as medical errors or disease outbreaks, accentuate the organization's commitment to learn from the experience and prevent similar incidents in the future. Whenever possible, provide journalists with examples of outstanding performance by physicians or staff in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Make full use of social media tools. Social media forums, such as an organizational Facebook page or Twitter account, are efficient and proactive ways to disseminate information. The organization's website can be used to respond to media inquiries, delivering background information and ongoing updates. In extreme situations, where the volume of traffic might overwhelm the main site, consider activating a separate crisis management web-based platform and directing reporters and the wider public to this location.

AFTER THE CRISIS

Summarize the outcome. To achieve closure after a newsworthy event, offer the media a written summary of the investigation outcome and any corrective actions taken. Post the summary on the organizational website. This will strengthen accountability and demonstrate that the organization accepts with utmost seriousness its duty to protect patients and improve the quality of care.

Review performance. Hold post-crisis debriefings to assess whether media encounters were managed effectively. At a minimum, the task force should discuss the following issues:

1. Were protocols implemented according to plan?
2. How was the organization portrayed in the various media?
3. What was the public response to the event, and did the organization disseminate information to the public in a timely manner, using all available resources?
4. What lessons can be learned from the experience, and what changes should be made?

Utilize the findings to modify and improve educational programs and simulations for staff and administrators.

With its proclivity toward life-or-death stories, the healthcare industry remains a prime media target. A repeated "no comment" to inquiries during a crisis forces reporters and the public to go elsewhere for answers. By cooperating and providing a flow of reliable and timely information through press conferences, media releases and electronic postings, organizations can protect their credibility and reputation, and prevent adverse situations from spinning out of control.

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