

ECDC KEY DOCUMENTS

Health communication strategy 2010–2013

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1 Background

1.1 Communication in the *ECDC Multi-annual Strategic Programme 2007-2013*

In the *ECDC Multi-annual Strategic Programme (MSP) 2007–2013*, target area 6 concerns communicating information on communicable disease prevention and control. Target 6 states: 'By the year 2013, ECDC's communication output will be the main European source of authoritative and independent scientific and technical information in its field and will be the reference support point in the European Union for risk communication on communicable diseases'.

This target will be reached through three strategies:

- **Strategy 6.1:** To efficiently communicate ECDC's scientific and technical output to professional audiences.
- **Strategy 6.2:** To develop the means, procedures and necessary partnerships for efficient and coordinated communication of key public health messages and information to the media and to the European public.
- **Strategy 6.3:** To support the Member States' health communication capacities.

1.2 ECDC mandate

ECDC's Founding Regulation puts a significant emphasis on communication. According to Article 3, ECDC's mission is 'to identify, assess and *communicate* current and emerging threats to human health posed by infectious diseases' [emphasis added]. Article 12 further states that 'the Centre shall communicate on its own initiative in the fields within its mission, after having given prior information to the Member States and to the Commission. It shall ensure that the public and any interested parties are rapidly given objective, reliable and easily accessible information with regard to the results of its work'. Further, 'the Centre shall act in close collaboration with the Member States and the Commission to promote the necessary coherence in the risk communication process on health threats'. The Centre shall also 'cooperate as appropriate with the competent bodies in the Member States and other interested parties with regard to public information campaigns'.

1.3 Strategic health communication challenges ahead

The major communication challenges for ECDC include the following:

- **Communicating in an EU setting.** ECDC acts in a complex multifaceted setting, serving 30 countries (with different communication capacities and resources) and various stakeholders in Europe with 25 official languages spoken. Communicating the scientific content generated by ECDC to meet the specific needs of the target audiences in a language and format that is adapted to and comprehensible by each audience is an ongoing challenge. This requires effective presentation and dissemination to ensure that those who need the information have easy access to it. Communication activities by the Member States (MS) and other EU institutions and agencies also need to be taken into account to facilitate this process.
- **Public health crises and events.** Public health events are communication challenges by definition. Governments, public health authorities and professionals as well as the media must be prepared to respond to a wide range of communication demands. This puts an emphasis on the need to develop skills, competencies and long-term structures dedicated to crisis communication in the public health arena.
- **Cross-sectoral interventions.** Contemporary public health developments are deeply dependent upon effective cross-sectoral interventions and programmes. This exposes new audiences, both lay and professional, to health communication and necessitates further audience research and planning to adapt to channels and key messages.
- **New media and new information-seeking behaviours.** The use of new media in public health may enable trusted sources to reach people more efficiently and with more tailored content, which diversifies possible modes of campaign engagement. The importance of new media for public health requires new approaches to future health communication initiatives. It will be necessary to explore the potentials of new media in order to increase health communication effectiveness and to best adapt to new information-seeking behaviours.
- **Behavioural change.** In the context of influencing risk behaviour and promoting preventive measures among a wider EU public, health communication is a new field of applied scientific research. A large number of public health interventions in the EU related to communicable diseases include this challenge as a programme objective.

The selection of these five major strategic challenges forms the basis for the broad field of ECDC health communication work and activities. Further to these strategic challenges, ECDC health communication activities aim to:

- develop a clear role for ECDC communication to become the Europe-wide resource on communicable diseases by providing clear and appropriate information based on scientific evidence;
- support EU and Member State activities to prevent and control communicable diseases identified as needing EU-level engagement;
- support EU and Member States' policymakers and experts with planning and assessing health communication programmes and campaigns;
- support Member States in developing skills and competencies in the area of health communication;
- support EU and Member States' initiatives that monitor perceptions, attitudes and behaviours related to communicable diseases.

2 Key target audiences

2.1 Public health professionals

ECDC is the main EU body for risk assessment in the area of communicable diseases, and the Centre, together with its partners, produces a wealth of scientific and technical knowledge and information related to public health. It follows that the main target audience of the Centre is public health professionals in the Member States and the EU institutions and agencies and other partner organisations who use this information in their daily work to promote public health in Europe. To reach out beyond the experts on the national level, ECDC needs to work in close partnership with communicators and interested public health experts engaged in communication in the Member States' Competent Bodies.

2.2 Policymakers

ECDC does not have a direct policy and risk management mandate. Nevertheless, the Centre plays an important role in providing policymakers with the necessary technical and scientific background and evidence to form the basis for informed policy decisions. Decision makers in the European and national Parliaments, the European Commission, as well as national health authorities and ministries of health are key audiences for ECDC outputs in the form of executive summaries, scientific and technical guidance, policy briefs and policy options.

2.3 EU citizens

ECDC is mandated to communicate directly with the European public. This needs to be done in a way that adds value to, and supports communication initiatives of the Member States' authorities, avoiding conflicting messages.

In the area of risk communication, ECDC does not foster its own network but instead plays a supporting role to the Commission-led Communicators' Network under the Health Security Committee, providing background material and media monitoring briefs and sharing communication messages.

On public information campaigns, ECDC coordinates and facilitates EU-wide campaigns, e.g. the European Antibiotic Awareness Day, and otherwise supports the Member States by developing and sharing communication toolkits in a variety of disease areas.

Information directed at the general public aims to be educational. In line with the Management Board's decision on ECDC language policy, such information will be translated into all EU languages, taking into account available resources, and adapted in such a way that it comes through cultural, social and linguistic borders.

2.4 Media

Successful media relations and ensuring that ECDC's messages are communicated clearly are the most efficient ways for the Centre to inform the general public about its activities. In addition, ensuring balanced media coverage is crucial to ECDC in maintaining its credibility vis-à-vis its various stakeholders, which has been illustrated during the recent public health event.

2.5 Public health communicators

ECDC works in partnership with public health communicators in the Member States, EU institutions and agencies, as well as in other partner organisations including the World Health Organization (WHO). Coordinated, non-contradictory messages from public health authorities build trust and strengthen the impact of the messages. It is

thus necessary to share information and communication messages between communicators. For this purpose, ECDC is actively building its own broad health communication networks as well as supporting the Commission's risk communicators' network.

2.6 Other health communication stakeholders

Among other key stakeholders, ECDC will establish close cooperation with academia especially dedicated to research and advanced training on health communication.

Additionally, WHO and the public health agencies in the United States (CDC Atlanta) and Canada (PHAC) are key partners in the development of coordinated global health communication messages and sharing of effective practice and evidence.

Working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and supporting efforts on health literacy issues will increasingly be a valid principle to reach wider audiences, particularly specific segments of hard-to-reach populations. A strategy for how best to work with NGOs is presently being developed by the Director's Cabinet as part of an overall stakeholder management strategy.

2.7 Prior information to the Member States and to the Commission

The duty of ECDC to inform Member States and the Commission before it 'communicates' is being met by circulating advance copies of scientific and technical reports as well as major press releases to dedicated focal points in the Commission and in the Member States before issuing them. The operational arrangements for the flow of 'prior information' were agreed with the Management Board in 2006.

3 Communication aims and objectives

ECDC's strategic communication objectives are:

- to raise awareness of issues related to communicable diseases among specific target EU audiences; and
- to establish ECDC's reputation as the leading European expert authority in the field.

In order to achieve these objectives, ECDC aims to:

- provide timely, evidence-based, authoritative information and guidance needed for public health action;
- provide educational information aimed at the general public;
- provide journalists with accurate and timely background information;
- act in close collaboration with the Member States and the European Commission to promote the necessary coherence in risk communication;
- support Member States to develop evidence-based materials for educational purposes targeting national audiences through national Competent Bodies;
- compile the latest evidence from communication science and effective health communication practice from the Member States;
- work together with WHO and other international partners on communication activities and joint planning.

Regarding health-related behaviours, ECDC communication objectives are to:

- promote positive perceptions and grounds for change on communicable diseases related behaviours;
- raise levels of public knowledge on communicable diseases;
- promote positive attitudes towards preventive behaviours that minimise the risks from communicable diseases.

Regarding broader corporate communication objectives, to be led by the Director's Cabinet, ECDC will focus on public relations activities aimed at:

- promoting positive attitudes from Member States' professionals and decision makers towards ECDC;
- promoting positive attitudes from international organisations involved in communicable diseases towards ECDC work;
- promoting positive attitudes from the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Competent Bodies towards ECDC.

4 Communication activities

To achieve its strategic objectives, ECDC will, via its Health Communication Unit (HCU), maintain and further develop the following areas of work:

4.1 Scientific communication (supports MSP Strategy 6:1)

It is an essential task of the Centre to efficiently communicate the scientific and technical output of ECDC in a high quality and consistent fashion to professional audiences.

The content and presentation of scientific/technical output to external audiences underpin the scientific expertise and excellence of ECDC. ECDC is committed to transforming the scientific information into clear messages, while acknowledging the range of needs of different audiences within the group of scientific and public health experts. Communication is thus not an isolated activity at the end-stage of a project, but needs to be an integral part of all scientific and technical work of the Centre, clearly establishing target groups and communication objectives at an early inception phase and adjusting the work accordingly.

ECDC provides clearly labelled and recognisable scientific documents that meet the needs of the targeted audience and allow the various stakeholder groups to identify information of specific interest to them. This is supported by maximum consistency and overall visual identity for various series and products. Flagship publications are the *Annual Epidemiological Report*, the joint ECDC/WHO annual reports on *HIV/AIDS* and *tuberculosis surveillance in Europe* and *Eurosurveillance*.

Different channels such as web-based publications, print material, presentations and emails are used for communication to the expert audience. An important element of the overall communication approach is the targeted group-specific dissemination of scientific/technical information. HCU leads a coordinated approach ensuring that information about ECDC's scientific publications reaches its target audience in a consistent manner for the various formats available.

4.2 Eurosurveillance (supports MSP Strategy 6:1)

Eurosurveillance is an editorially fully independent scientific journal published by ECDC that aims to be the leading European journal in the field of epidemiology, prevention and control of communicable diseases. While mainly publishing scientific articles by non-ECDC authors, it complements the other ECDC efforts in scientific communication. With its very short publication cycle it has become a leading global and frequently cited vehicle for dissemination of rapid, authoritative information on outbreaks and other public health events of international importance. With the recent acceptance of its application for an 'impact factor', the strategic focus in the next years will be to broaden the base of authors, reviewers and readers and increase the number and quality of the longer research articles. The success of *Eurosurveillance* rests on its excellent scientific reputation and editorial independence, which both need to be fully maintained.

4.3 Public communication (supports MSP Strategy 6:2)

ECDC mainly communicates directly to the general public via its website, as other means of direct mass communication are beyond its resources. ECDC serves a population of around 500 million people (over 200 million households). The cost of sending just one simple leaflet to this number of households would be enormous (exceeding EURO 50 million).

Given the mandate and strategic priorities of ECDC, information to the general public will be framed as support to national efforts on health education. Thus, ECDC will develop health education materials directed at the general public to be used in cooperation with the relevant Competent Bodies, taking into account the information needs of specific audiences and employing effective audience targeting.

With the new web portal in place, efforts will be made to clearly differentiate health education content aimed at the general public from the more technical information and guidance aimed at public health experts and policymakers. To meet the challenges of bringing such messages across to citizens in 30 countries with different socio-economic and educational backgrounds, ECDC has made use of the findings of a large qualitative study on 'Citizens' demands for ECDC information' carried out in early 2009.

Furthermore, ECDC, in its communications to the public, will be using methods based on a variety of well demonstrated approaches to strategic segmentation for health communication, including socio-demographic and psychographic variables, levels of health literacy, health information needs, health information-seeking habits, past experience of communicable diseases.

4.4 Multilingualism (supports MSP Strategy 6:2)

As a European Union Agency, ECDC is committed to multilingualism. Based on the language policy decision of its Management Board in 2007, ECDC communicates all outputs to scientific/technical audiences in English only. Documents geared towards the general public, however, are published in all 23 official languages of the European Union, plus Norwegian and Icelandic. The translation is provided by the Translation Centre for the Bodies of the European Union, in Luxembourg. To ensure the correctness of the translated documents, all such documents need to undergo a quality check by native speakers. This process is resource-intensive and thus all documents for translation undergo careful selection. To manage this process, appropriate mechanisms are being established and will be further developed.

4.5 Media relations (supports MSP Strategy 6:2)

ECDC recognises that the press and media are essential in conveying news and information to our target groups across Europe. In this regard, ECDC will continue to strengthen and work closely with its media network to provide clear and effective health communication at an EU level.

Due to the variety and intensity of news and media forms, ECDC will continue to develop appropriate strategies to deal with all media (written, online, new media, TV and radio) on health-related topics. This approach will also be bolstered by creating targeted communications to develop specific messages. This approach requires a highly professional press office that can deal with all planned media events and emergencies. In this regard, ECDC needs to ensure that media and public communications are timely, proactive and significant and that the most appropriate media channel is used for the target audiences.

ECDC will continue to foster a network of well-informed and competent EU, national and health journalists who are interested in ECDC and health issues. ECDC will also continue to identify and develop opportunities for ECDC senior staff and experts to fully engage with EU media.

4.6 Knowledge and Resource Centre on Health Communication (mainly supports MSP Strategy 6:3, but also Strategies 6:1 and 6:2)

Communications resources vary considerably between the countries. A useful role of ECDC identified in the MSP is therefore to provide support to the Competent Bodies of the Member States on health communication. Elements of health communication relevant to the Competent Bodies include risk communication, support of citizens' and professionals' search for and use of health information, construction of public health messages and campaigns, and assessments of the population's perceptions of health risks and adherence to health recommendations (behavioural surveillance). ECDC aims to facilitate the pooling of knowledge and exchange of good practice on health communications that it facilitates in the other areas of its work.

To fulfil these diverse and challenging roles, the ECDC health communication team will strengthen its work with its internal and external partners through timely involvement and discussions on upcoming health communication needs and plans. This will encourage the process of putting together evidence to further deepen our understanding of EU health information needs, media usage and diverse audiences.

To achieve these purposes, a new Health Communication Knowledge and Resource Centre (KRC) has been established with three main objectives:

- To provide current and evidence-based information on health communication and related topics, with a particular focus on infectious diseases in the European region.
- To facilitate the process of sharing effective practice and lessons learned between public health professionals in EU Member States and EEA/EFTA countries.
- To promote and facilitate health communication support for EU Member States and EEA/EFTA public health professionals.

The KRC has thus been established to support the Member States, but the evidence generated by its work will also support other ECDC communication activities, including contributions to assess and evaluate the impact, the effectiveness and the ongoing needs of health communication activities developed by ECDC.

4.7 Supporting public health information campaigns (supports MSP Strategy 6:3)

With its position as an EU-level expert authority, pooling expertise from across Europe, ECDC is well placed to support and coordinate multinational information campaigns. A positive practical experience at ECDC was the annual European Antibiotic Awareness Day (EAAD), for which ECDC coordinates campaign themes and messages, sets up a multilingual website, produces campaign materials, including TV spots and media toolkits, all in order to support and assist the campaigns carried out by the Member States. ECDC also produces communication toolkits on other topics that vary from year to year according to identified needs, as well as providing support to the initiatives of its partner organisations, including World Aids Day, World TB Day, European Immunisation Week, World Hand Hygiene Day, and others to follow. These toolkits could then be used as they are or being adapted by the countries to fit the specific national needs. This support will be developed in close coordination with the work and evidence generated by the KRC.

4.8 Web services (supports MSP Strategies 6:1, 6:2 and 6:3)

The new ECDC web portal is the most effective channel for communicating with ECDC target groups and stakeholders. The frequent content updates, logical structure of the navigation with clear categories of information will increase credibility and ensure solid growth of the visibility of ECDC among its target audiences.

Professionalism is a word that should be connected to all content on the ECDC websites. Therefore, quality of the products is a priority. The high quality standards need be maintained in the content itself, the way the content is presented and how the content can be found in the internet. The latter requires standardised metadata for all content and a structure for the content optimised for search engines.

To get better publicity for the ECDC publications and events, specific sets of web items will be made. Also thematic months, in which the main items on the home page are linked to one health topic, will be used to highlight specific issues. The capacity to build specific content areas containing updated situation reports for a possible public health event must be maintained.

The content targeted to the general public will be translated following the translation policy of the ECDC. ECDC web services will also provide channels for targeted content for the media, policymakers and public health professionals. The sub/co-branded websites for campaigns (i.e. EAAD), conferences (i.e. ESCAIDE) and training (i.e. EPIET) will provide targeted content and features for their user groups.

The contact between ECDC and target audiences is increasingly based on two-way communication. The ECDC portal will provide a set of tools for interaction between users and ECDC. The extranets for the different user groups will be created for enabling two-way communication between the identified external users and ECDC. The user surveys, information feeds, wiki-like publications and discussion fora will offer the channels for reaching the general public from the public side from the portal.

4.9 Closing remarks

This strategy paper establishes the principles for the development of health communication activities for the period 2010–2013.

Operational developments will be ongoing and supported by a flexible approach according to identified needs.