Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action

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Bullet points of a November 20, 2001 presentation to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; not intended for stand-alone use.

- 1. Don't over-reassure.
- 2. Put the "good news" in subordinate clauses.
- 3. Acknowledge uncertainty.
- 4. Share dilemmas.
- 5. Do anticipatory guidance.
- 6. Acknowledge the sins of the past.
- 7. Be regretful, not defensive.
- 8. Ride the preparedness seesaw.
- 9. Acknowledge and legitimate people's fears.
- 10. Surface the underlying fear of future bioterrorism.
- 11. Be gentle about that awful future.
- 12. Surface and legitimate the misery.
- 13. Express wishes.
- 14. Stop trying to allay panic.
- 15. Protect your credibility and reduce the chances of panic with candor.
- 16. Err on the alarming side.
- 17. Be willing to answer what-if questions.
- 18. Give people things to do.
- 19. Give people a choice of actions to match their level of concern.
- 20. Harness the hypervigilance ... to disentangle it from the paranoia.
- 21. Ask more of people.
- 22. Never use the word "safe" without qualifying it.
- 23. Find a non-zero standard for anthrax.
- 24. Be careful with risk comparisons.
- 25. Identify and legitimate misimpressions before correcting them.
- 26. Watch out for your own outrage.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action (Dec 2001) www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm
- CDC Responds: Risk Communication and Bioterrorism (Dec 2001) www.sph.unc.edu/about/webcasts/2001-12-06 risk/view webcast archive.cfm
- Anthrax, politicians, and PR (Feb 2002) www.psandman.com/gst2002.htm#rowan