Enterohemorrhagic
Escherichia coli Epidemic:
The Sensitive Role of the
Media in the Handling of
Epidemics

To the Editor—The recent enterohemorrhagic Escherichia coli (EHEC) O104:H4 outbreak in Germany has reinforced the importance of proper communication. The infection in May 2011 spread to several European countries in 1 month [1]. In this instance, a number of conspiracy theories circulated, for example, that the epidemic would spread to the general population, that the bacterium was genetically engineered, or that it was a bioterrorism attack. Cucumbers from Spain were blamed for the epidemic without any reliable data. The speculations and false reports caused economic problems and political tensions between various nations. Health authorities advised people to refrain from the consumption of cucumbers, tomatoes, lettuce, and meat in Germany [2]. The exportation of fresh vegetables to countries worldwide declined. Tons of cucumbers were destroyed, and thus these farmers’ incomes dropped sharply. Later, soybean sprouts from Germany were identified as the cause of the epidemic [2].

The most important factor that caused this confusion was the spread of unconfirmed and chaotic information disclosed by official authorities to the media. The media tended to use alarming and mysterious descriptions such as “deadly superbug,” “monster bacteria,” “killer bug,” and “EHEC plague” to gain the public’s attention. EHEC was even erroneously defined as a virus. A Google search under “EHEC and virus” returns more than 1,300,000 results (18 August 2011). Most of these Web sites are simply copied versions of the others. Therefore, websites, social media such as Twitter and Facebook, and blogs, including personal opinions and experiences, may have helped to disseminate inaccurate or misleading information [3, 4]. As a result of media coverage, the outbreak gained considerable attention [5] and caused widespread panic. Thus, in a television news bulletin, the World News Agency remarked that the “E. coli outbreak opens 2011 virtual virus hysteria season” [6]. The fear spread faster than the outbreak itself (Figure 1).
The press tends to give more space to rare and dramatic events, and people tend to pay more attention to this kind of news. A student survey to evaluate how people gather information about infectious diseases showed that students paid more attention to diseases that received more media attention. In contrast, when descriptions of the diseases were given without being named, students had a tendency to prioritize the dangerous diseases that had little coverage in the media [7].

This outbreak confirmed that effective communication with the media is needed to manage a crisis during a pandemic. As a result, the mass media can play a positive role in crisis management instead of causing panic [8]. Journalists should refrain from publishing unconfirmed health information, and the development of an integrated communication network between news organizations, reporters, and health authorities should be a priority. In addition, by working together, these organizations could turn the outbreak into an opportunity to educate consumers and food handlers in safe food-handling practices, even in outbreak-free regions.

Note

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The author has submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest. Conflicts that the editors consider relevant to the content of the manuscript have been disclosed.

Hakan Leblebicioglu
Department of Infectious Diseases and Clinical Microbiology, Ondokuz Mayis University, Samsun, Turkey

References


Correspondence: Hakan Leblebicioglu, MD, Department of Infectious Diseases and Clinical Microbiology, Ondokuz Mayis University, Samsun 55139, Turkey (hakanomu@yahoo.com).

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Figure 1. Media coverage and enterohemorrhagic Escherichia coli outbreak, 2011.