

# Effective Public Health Communication Strategies with Department of Defense Personnel



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Chair, Public Health Subcommittee  
November 29, 2023



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## Overview / Agenda



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- Background
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# Membership



**CHAIR**  
Wilsie Bishop DPA, MPA\*

\*Board Member



Georges Benjamin, MD



John Clements, PHD



Marion Ehrich, PhD, MS



Ruth Etzel, MD, PHD

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Christopher Johnson, PHD

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# Tasking



On May 12, 2023, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs directed the Defense Health Board (DHB) to **provide recommendations on how the DoD could better deliver health information within an environment of misinformation.**

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## Background



- Inaccurate information about health harms public health and undermines trust in public health professionals.
- Inaccuracies can be characterized as *misinformation* (false or inaccurate fact claims) and *disinformation* (intentional spread of falsehoods).
- The information landscape during the COVID-19 Pandemic was exceptionally complex and influenced by multiple factors.
- Tension between freedom of expression and protecting the public good permeates efforts to mitigate the impacts of mis- and disinformation.

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## Objectives and Scope



- Identify lessons learned about DoD's vulnerabilities and capabilities in disseminating health information during the COVID pandemic.
- Review DoD/DHA policies and processes used for health communications.
- Review academic, commercial, and government research on best practices for health communications.
- Provide recommendations for how the DoD could better deliver health information within an environment of misinformation and threats to credibility.

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## Summary of Activities to Date



Meeting Date	Discussion Topics
Jan 20, 2023: PH Meeting	Potential Health Communications tasking
Jun 14, 2023: PH Meeting	Health Communications report development overview
Jun 28, 2023: DHB Meeting	DHA Strategic Communications
Jul 24, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow-up from DHA Strategic Communications</li> <li>• Public health response to COVID-19</li> </ul>
Aug 25, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Military culture</li> <li>• Misinformation and disinformation</li> <li>• A perspective on government censorship</li> <li>• Science of health communications</li> <li>• Informal military communications panel</li> </ul>

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## Summary of Activities to Date



Meeting Date	Discussion Topics
Sep 19, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DoD/DHA legal authorities</li> <li>• Chapter 1 discussion</li> </ul>
Oct 10, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public health communication strategies</li> <li>• Civic Online Reasoning</li> </ul>
Oct 31, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Military spouses panel</li> </ul>
Nov 21, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health risk communication</li> <li>• News and information environment</li> </ul>

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## Emerging Findings



- DoD health communications are military-specific but occur within a complex and influential civilian communication environment.
- Trust is essential to messaging uptake and to successful misinformation and disinformation mitigation efforts. Leadership and trusted messengers are essential components.
- Communicating the underpinnings of public health decisions (e.g., the role of uncertainty in the scientific process; how and why scientists and officials coalesce around certain positions) allows experts to partner with citizens on public health decision making.

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## Emerging Findings



- Cultural perspectives, personal experiences, and beliefs may affect perceptions of the legitimacy of the scientific process and public trust. Bilateral communication and appropriate acknowledgement and treatment of minority scientific perspectives is vital even as consensus positions are actioned.
- Understanding variables that influence how communications are received and working through non-official as well as official channels and mediums are essential to making DOD communications the message of choice.

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## (Potential) Emerging Findings



- PH informs policy but does not dictate it. Elected leaders and individual citizens weight PH guidance alongside other values, interests, and concerns. Explaining and demonstrating this distinction to the public may help to ameliorate trust barriers and improve compliance.
- Trust and compliance may be impeded by audience perceptions that PH officials do not share their own values, beliefs, and experiences.
- DoD needs to provide *context* for its recommendations. For example, managing new viruses requires a cooperative effort to prevent transmission and sufficient vaccination to reach herd immunity.

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## Areas of Further Interest



- Impact of delayed communication during early phases of the pandemic
  - Implication for future pandemics and bio-incidents (natural, accidental, intentional)?
- Role of the clinician in health communications?
- Media information ecosystem and information flows
- Artificial intelligence technology
- Information Security
- Effectiveness of misinformation interventions (pre/debunking, fact checking etc.)

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# Way Ahead



- Subcommittee meetings with briefings from Subject Matter Experts
- Report development with the Chair and Subcommittee

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# Questions



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