

### **Get Your Information Out Early**

It is important, particularly with regard to disasters, to give the public some idea of the kind of plans and procedures your organization is formulating to manage the crisis.

When documented cases of anthrax being sent through the U.S. mail were rampant, laboratories in Denver, CO. were unable to rule out the possibility of anthrax exposure in the case of a postal worker who was being treated for a suspicious respiratory illness. In turn, postal workers in Ft. Collins (who were not identified as being in direct threat of anthrax exposure) showed up at a clinic to receive antibiotics that were unnecessary.

In another situation, in 2000, before state and local officials had made a decision about how the public should respond to a hurricane, many people in Florida and Georgia self-evacuated based on their analysis of what they saw on The Weather Channel.

In crises, speculation and public debates circulate – ‘is it this?’ or ‘is it that?’ People seek answers. Information that comes out early during a crisis sets the tone for information and actions that follow. The CDC was getting ready to conduct an investigation on the H5N1 incident when a second human case of H5N1 was reported. A veterinarian scientist who studied influenza in animals held a news conference to talk about it, and made a statement similar to “this is it, this is our next pandemic, this is our pandemic strain ... this is our smoking gun.” Although he was an authority – he did not do the world, the people in Hong Kong, or anyone for that matter a favor by stating this so emphatically. It hit the news immediately and changed the whole tenor of the investigation. From that point forward, regardless of how many times the CDC stated the three aspects needed to have a pandemic, everything was just pure speculation.