

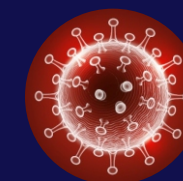


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National Health & Risk Communication Programme The Year of Awareness on Science & Health (YASH)

Focus on COVID19



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Background

The current scenario of a pandemic has posed concerns and challenges all around where scientific awareness and health preparedness can play a significant role to help combat the situation with translation and usage of authentic scientific information to convey the risks involved and facilitate the communities to overcome the situation. A comprehensive and effective science and health communication effort for promoting grass-root level appreciation and response on the subject would be an advantage for saving and shaping the lives of the people at large as well as building confidence, inculcating scientific temper and promoting health consciousness amongst them.

In order to facilitate necessary actions and preparedness of the society to address the challenge, the strategies were worked out by involving academic, research, media and voluntary organizations. The translation and usage of authentic scientific and health information to communicate the risks and facilitate risk management, an immediate and effective science communication for promoting community level response is desirable.

As an effort towards science and health awareness and preparedness with focus on COVID19, a yearlong campaign on science and health awareness and risk communication has been initiated. Health and risk communication in the society may eventually lead to informed decisions by the people at large thereby promoting community preparedness and sustainable health and hygiene culture. NITI Ayog has also sought various scientific interventions specially to address the following amid COVID19-

- New waves of infection and new transmission areas : Urban-to-rural migration & its potential acceleration during/after the lock down.
- Community based resource mobilization in rural areas : Limited public & private health system capacity including quarantine, testing and management of patients, panic and higher risks to health workers.
- Building Trust and Anti stigma atmosphere : Potential stigmatization of returning migrants; panic and/or fear and lack of trust amongst community and vis a vis health worker.

In view of the variety and spread of NCSTC programmes and activities on various aspects of science and technology communication and popularization across the country especially the programmes centered on public health and hygiene, water and sanitation, hands on science, media, and public awareness, etc., a comprehensive yearlong programme targeting at different levels of stakeholders is envisaged on health and risk communication focusing on COVID 19 for an immediate, medium-term, and sustainable response to the health risks posed mainly by communicable diseases.

The Concept

Risk communication is by and large concerning the situation where the life of the people at large is at a risk.

Be it an epidemic, a pandemic, risks of genetically engineered food, nuclear disaster, or extreme weather situations, etc., need to be addressed immediately with right kind of approach and public awareness using interdisciplinary scientific knowledge and practices. Ongoing reciprocal communication among all beneficiaries is an integral part of the risk management process.

Risk Communication is more than the dissemination of information and a major function is the process by which information and opinion essential to effective risk management is incorporated into the decisions of risk management.

The overall concept behind evolving such an initiative is not just diffusion of information among masses and pacify public concerns but also to nurture an informed public response to reach a reasonable, thoughtful, and collaborative solution. The necessity of two-way risk communication process has also been highlighted by FAO/WHO in the context of COVID19.

It may be mentioned here that NCSTC has organized a variety of programmes and projects earlier with a countrywide presence and high impact and has developed networking with a range of organizations and resource persons across the country.

It is to further develop the experience and implement a yearlong programme on health and risk communication on current and emerging issues covering science communication priorities related to the preparedness for disasters, crises, hazards, calamities and emergencies, and health risks, climate change, sustainable development goals (SDGs), occupational and lifestyle problems, risk prevention in digital technologies and cyber security, traditional and local knowledge practices for risk reduction, etc., and catering to different stakeholders.

The initiative is aimed at encouraging public participation in risk related reciprocal communication processes to open routes for better decision making and stakeholders' involvement. This could entail incorporating explanations of risk assessment process, strategically addressing the different ways of target groups to interpret science and different notions of acceptable risks and beyond.

Objectives

An indicative set of objectives of science, health and risk communication programme includes, and not limited to, the following:

1. To minimize risks at all levels with the help of public communication and outreach activities at large.
2. To promote public understanding of common minimum science for community care and health safety measures like personal sanitation and hygiene, physical distancing, and maintaining desired collective behaviours, etc.
3. To develop and disseminate science communication software, enhance science coverage in mass media including illustrative interpretations especially to reduce the fear of risks and build confidence with a dose of necessary understanding.
4. To assess and rationalize community preparedness and perceptions.
5. To inculcate scientific temper for adopting sustainable healthy lifestyles, and nurturing scientific culture among masses and societies.

Implementation

The State Councils of Science & Technology will be involved in implementation of the programme. Awareness software materials to be provided in Hindi and English. Efforts may be made to have the resource material in regional languages as well. An expert committee will oversee the programme planning and implementation including monitoring, evaluation and report.

The activities to be directed to ascertain and fulfill communication needs, could be like:

1. The communicators and volunteers may be trained across the country to help spread health awareness in their respective areas and languages.
2. Science cartoon (scientoon), comics-based information materials, audio-visual programmes, clips, etc., are planned.
3. Digital, e-books, pamphlets, booklets (digital/ print), info-graphics, etc., may be prepared. Street plays, theatre, skits, puppetry, folklore, etc., may be developed.
4. Swasthya Yatra, Jatha, Vigyan Mela, exhibitions, gallery, etc, may be organized.
5. Webinars, Web-shops, online/ offline lectures, conferences, workshops, etc., with different stakeholders are envisaged on the subject and beyond.

6. Collaborative programmes with other organizations, etc., are envisaged for current and post-crisis scenario; current and post crisis campaigns to be worked out.
7. Handling info-demic, fake news, misinformation, etc.
8. Trust building between the people and healthcare workers to ensure fulfilling the needs of community through clarity of scientific messages.
9. India is home of different faiths, customs, and belief systems. The science communication programmes need to be weaved into the cultural fabric of the nation. Science communication efforts by only refuting them and working in isolation may not penetrate well into the society and may experience a great deal of deviation. Generally, people tend to listen to the preaching of different faith leaders; this trust and belief on faith leaders can be harnessed for conveying scientific and health messages among masses for the benefit of people. Such programmes may be planned for science and health communication by involving different faith leaders.
10. Building local risk managers or opinion/ learning facilitators vis-a-vis capacity of healthcare systems and access to the same.
11. Important community functionaries:
 - i) Rural areas: Panchayati Raj Institutions – ward member, Sarpanch, Block representatives, Zilla parishad representatives, etc., Self-help groups, Community-based organizations, Community-based government functionaries, like ASHAs, Anganwadi workers, Agriculture extension workers, teachers, ANMs.
 - ii) Urban areas: Urban local bodies, Non-government organizations, Resident welfare associations, Community-based organizations.
12. Evolving and using community-based effective science communication approaches and software through virtual/ digital interface (WhatsApp/ SMS/ others or traditional and creative yet nonphysical contact modes for compliance with health instructions thereby reducing avoidable pressure on the healthcare systems.
13. Applying local languages for risk communications with illustrative interpretations of scientific knowledge and for informing role and responsibility of people to support health emergency management.
14. Encouraging scientific evidence-based reporting by media to all stakeholders including health workers about affliction and redress measures.
15. Encouraging personal sanitation and hygiene, locally making masks using the guidelines issued by the office of PSA, etc.
16. Developing science communication software on radio, video, films, books, booklets, science cartoons, and other science media related activities.

17. Activities under ongoing programmes to develop young change-makers for responding to natural or manmade disasters and calamities.
18. Folk media (puppetry, nukkad-natak, song, drama, etc.) based and digital science communication as well as field programmes.
19. STEMM demonstration activities, fairs and exhibitions, and target group specific outreach, etc.
20. Innovative approaches to communication would be an advantage, including surveys
public opinion research, public understanding of science and health issues, etc.

In addition to utilizing already available authentic materials (ICMR capsules, PIB material, MOHFW guidelines, etc.), new information materials to be developed and disseminated to focus on risk and health communication.

In order to facilitate necessary actions and to ensure preparedness of the society to face the challenge and threat posed by the pandemic of COVID-19 the YASH programme is being put together.

In the current scenario of anxiety, depression and challenges, the translation and usage of common minimum science and authentic information to communicate the risks and facilitate risk management, an immediate and effective science communication for promoting community level response was desired.

Expected Outcome

The inherent idea of the programme is to build capacities and enable communities to develop a sense of awareness, an analytical mind, and take an informed decision especially when it comes to healthcare and risk for their wellbeing. Some of the expected outcomes are summarized here:

1. Improved risk understanding amongst target groups including working with local sensitivities, belief systems, traditions, and indigenous knowledge by way of using different channels of communication.
2. Attitudinal changes among target groups about appreciating risks, associated challenges, solutions, and coping up the situation with courage and confidence.
3. Better working relations with community leaders, influencers including faith leaders, doctors, etc.
4. Improved ability to clarify mis-perceptions, mis-beliefs, mall-practices based on authentic knowledge duly verified by scientific process.
5. Trust in scientific competence of solutions/ service providers.
6. Science communication about individual risk reduction measures.

7. Target group specific interpretations for emergency readiness and behavioural change.
8. Assessment of public perceptions and encouraging public engagement.
9. Enhanced public participation in health and risk related reciprocal communication processes to open routes for better decision making and stakeholders' involvement.
10. Availability of a range of science, health, and risk communication software in terms of publications, audio-visual, digital platforms, folk performances, trained communicators, especially in regional languages to cater to various cross sections of society.

Evaluation & Report

A feedback and evaluation mechanism would be incorporated in the programme. A report would be prepared and submitted at the completion of the programme to the Department. The risk communication initiative for sustainable health and future preparedness based on current and post COVID approach offers a composite response to be brought in.

About NCSTC

The National Council for Science & Technology Communication (NCSTC) is the apex body of the Govt. of India for science and technology communication and popularization and inculcation of scientific and technological temper among masses including coordination and orchestration of such efforts in the country. It came into being in 1982 and started functioning in 1984. The programmes and activities of NCSTC aim at building capacity for informed decision making at community level and promote scientific thinking. Since its inception, NCSTC has been devoted towards societal upliftment through dissemination of scientific knowledge in simple and lucid manner to reach out to the masses at large. The programmes and activities developed by employing different mass media percolate at grass-root level and nooks and corners of the country. The NCSTC focuses on outreach activities, training in science and technology communication, development, production and dissemination of popular science software, incentive programmes, and field-based projects, research and academics in science communication, international co-operation, motivating students and teachers, environment awareness and programmes with special component for women. Some of the important initiatives include: Years of Scientific Awareness, Physics, Astronomy, Year of Planet Earth, National Science Day, National Mathematics Day, National Children's Science Congress, National Teacher's Science Congress, Indian Science Communication Congress, Academic Courses and Research in Science & Technology Communication, Vigyan Jatha, Eco & WaSH Literacy, AWSAR, Science Express, etc. A multi-pronged effort has been developed by NCSTC including science through mass media, folk media, digital media, and social media as well for effective science and technology communication and popularization.