Reviewer's report

Title: Effective Media Communication of Disasters: Pressing Problems and Recommendations

Version: 1 Date: 20 February 2007

Reviewer: Ivan Oransky

Reviewer's report:

General

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Thank you for the opportunity to review this paper. It covers an important and timely subject, but I believe that in its current form, it falls short of offering new and important recommendations.

The section on “PROFESSIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL REALITIES” alludes to the real issue affecting the relationship between PIOs and journalists; namely that journalists do not see themselves as ciphers simply reporting what information is given – nor should they. This issue is only compounded by PIOs whose agencies discourage them from being forthright, as has happened too often in recent times. It is naïve to ignore the obvious conflict of interest of PIOs: They are employed by agencies which want to be seen in the best light possible, and the information they disseminate is therefore very likely to trend positive. That is almost never in the best interests of the public. All of these issues came up in the discussion, as is evidenced by the “Results” section. But none of the recommendations address these critical problems, which will seriously hinder their usefulness.

I don’t have a particular problem with any of the recommendations that are presented, but they mostly seem obvious, and, as the authors note, are consistent with previous papers on the subject. As a result, I am not sure that this paper offers much original material. I would strongly suggest that the authors consider going back to the transcripts of the advisor discussion and look for material that would address the real issues in PIO-journalist relationships that I discuss above. It might even be necessary to re-convene the advisors in light of the experience with Hurricane Katrina, which was an abysmal failure from the point of view of the PIO-journalist relationship, and occurred after the 2004 meetings of the advisors.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Who were these 26 expert advisors? What mix of journalists and public health officials was present? A list of names and affiliations would allow readers to evaluate the strength of their recommendations.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

None

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.