Public Health and the Media: The Challenge Now Faced by Bioterrorism

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When West Nile virus first appeared in New York City in 1999, the media frenzy that accompanied it was at the time without precedent. Under an intense media spotlight, public health officials scrambled to find ways to explain how it got here, what risk it imposed, and how to protect against it. There were far more questions than answers, including some passing speculation about whether the virus was the result of an intentional bioterrorist act. With the real threat of bioterrorism now on us, the press, with little memory of the role it plays in sensationalizing topics, has characterized West Nile virus as a public health footnote, a commonplace bug.

Indeed, the media blitz surrounding the anthrax situation in New York City and elsewhere has far surpassed the crush of 1999. Nonetheless, West Nile provided a drill of sorts for the challenge public health is now facing. We learned most importantly about the need to address perceptions of risk, to have credible communicators, and to get information out in a timely and consistent way. In the past few weeks, this has meant getting the facts out to the public rather than inventing ways to reassure the public. It has also involved acknowledging the seriousness of bioterrorism, but at the same time pointing out that thus far the morbidity and mortality associated with it are far surpassed by preventable illnesses like influenza and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Admitting when we do not yet have the answers has also been required.

With the media finding itself not just covering the public health response, but, as one of the bioterrorists targets, also benefiting from public health's protection, the scrutiny placed on public health is at close range. Moreover, with the nation's defense challenged since September 11, 2001, the weight public health and its communicators bear is considerable, with little room for missteps.

Unlike the risk that passes at the end of a flu or mosquito season, there is no end in sight for this current menace. Even in the presence of tremendous uncertainty, it is more important than ever for public health communicators to understand the need of the media and the public for information that is credible, clear, and consistent.