



INTRODUCTION

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This guide is for the people who write the words, who take the pictures, and who tell the stories about the events in our world—both ordinary and extraordinary. It is intended to provide information about how the public health system is preparing for and will respond to previously unthinkable events, such as September 11. More specifically, the guide's intent is to offer the best possible information about the worst-case scenarios.

The efforts of public health agencies at the federal, state, and local levels to prepare for what could happen in the future are largely invisible until there is an emerging threat, such as the recent SARS outbreak, or a dramatic event, such as the anthrax attacks of 2001. Through this effort, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) intends to provide the best available and most essential up-to-date health-related facts and background information that will be needed in the event of a terrorist attack or public health emergency. In addition, HHS hopes to reveal the commitment and often hidden complexity of the public health domain to news people who live in the world of here and now. The goal of this guide is not to tell you how to report or what to think but to serve as a resource at the time of an event and to provide guidance about what may be some of the most important stories ever written.

As ambitious as this enterprise is, it has limits. No one volume can contain everything the media need to know about reporting on terrorism and public health emergencies. While this guide is the product of some of the best available expertise inside and, in some cases, outside of the government, no one would claim this is the final word on the subject. It is a work in progress and will be updated online as new information becomes available.

Some may look at this volume skeptically as the product of a government agency with an agenda or a bureaucratic mindset. Others may view this guide for reporting on possible apocalyptic events as advancing a kind of doomsday mentality. The intention is neither.

The intention is to meet the need for credible source material on terrorism and other very real public health threats. The reports and images that would shape people's view of a possible terror attack or other health crisis would have an extraordinary impact not only on the readers, listeners, and viewers but also the writers of those stories. The burden is great for those who follow, or in some cases lead, first responders into the unknown and are then asked to emerge calmly with the facts.

While there is a difference between the roles of the public health professional and the journalist, there are also similarities. Both face dangers, both seek the truth, and both see communication as a primary goal. However, the intent here is not to merge these two disciplines or even suggest that one serve as a conduit for the other. Often, the media and government are adversaries due to the nature of their functions in society. Yet, the hope is that this guide will help to foster transparency and understanding between government health officials and journalists and to build a bridge that many will need to cross, if the time comes.

This tool will be most useful in the early phase of a terrorism event or major public health emergency but also has relevance for other public health events, such as disease outbreaks. It is not meant to supplant other works from either private or governmental sources but rather, to provide a different and complementary perspective. What is different here is that this guide assembles a wide variety of resources and filters them through the lens of public health action immediately following a major public health event. In addition to collecting extensive background information on possible terror weapons and agents, there is source material on how public health agencies and professionals function in an emergency.

There is also a chapter on the risk communication approach used by many public health officials. Communicating risk in the most responsible and accurate way during an emergency will be an ongoing challenge for the government—and the media. Here, the media and public health officials share the same goal—quickly providing the public with accurate information. Achieving this goal is critical to saving lives.



“Some say that this ‘new normal’ requires a new arrangement. They say the news media and government should pursue a ‘partnership’ to get the job done. That is neither practical nor wise. And it won’t happen. The news media have a job to do that requires them to stand aside. They should inform. They should investigate. They should hold responsible officials to account. To do this they must remain independent from those they cover, even against the grim backdrop of terrorism.

That is not to say, however, that there are not common interests and even common responsibilities.

JOURNALISTS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS BOTH SERVE THE PUBLIC. BOTH NEED TO BE SURE THE INFORMATION THEY DISSEMINATE IS ACCURATE, CREDIBLE, TIMELY, AND RELEVANT. BOTH MUST KNOW THAT THEY WILL PAY A PRICE IF THEY FAIL TO DO THEIR JOBS WELL. ”

*Frank Sesno, university professor of public policy and communication at George Mason University and former Washington, D.C. bureau chief for CNN
Testimony before the House Select Committee on Homeland Security, September 2004*

More than a year in the making, this guide has been extensively reviewed for accuracy by government scientists and experts in HHS and other federal agencies. Factually, the book represents the best current understanding of the problems as seen by HHS. In addition, several veteran journalists provided their insights and comments about what worked and what didn’t in the guide from a media perspective. Their input has been incorporated and responded to whenever possible.

Some of the key topics addressed in this work are:

- › Information about the most likely biological, chemical, and radiological weapons that could be used by terrorists.
- › Unanswered questions and conflicting opinions about certain terrorist agents.
- › The emotional impact of disaster on the public and how that is likely to affect people’s reactions.
- › How public health does its job in an emergency. For example, how does a disease detective track down the cause of an outbreak? When can quarantine be declared?

- › What are the emotional consequences for journalists who spend a sustained period of time covering a disaster? What can be done to help reporters shield themselves from stress and other dangers that can affect their lives and their work?

This guide was written to be a helpful companion that can help inform your best work while trying to keep you safe. In every page of this book, there is that hope and that commitment.

REFERENCE

Sesno, F. (2004, September). *Covering terrorism: New challenges in a new era*. Testimony before the House Select Committee on Homeland Security.

