

## CHAPTER 8

# PUBLIC AWARENESS

## INTRODUCTION

Public awareness is vital to the successful prevention or containment of FMD. This chapter describes the measures necessary to inform and secure the support of the general public, media and farmers when there is a threat of FMD or an actual outbreak. Its primary focus is on the FMD information programme to be implemented by the Press Office when there is an outbreak. It should be read in conjunction with Chapter 8, **Communications**, which focuses on the complementary role of the Animal Health Welfare Division.

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## **1. PEACETIME**

- 1.1 Public awareness of the threat posed to the country by exotic animal diseases should be maintained at all times. In normal circumstances this is achieved by means of public notices/announcements at points of entry to the country. Additional posters warning of the dangers are displayed at District Veterinary Offices, marts and other locations. The target audience is primarily tourists, importers, farmers and private veterinary practitioners.

## **2. GENERAL APPROACH TO AN FMD ALERT**

- 2.1 DAF will be proactive in communications and publicity in relation to FMD. Through this approach the public will be kept fully informed of events, public and political support will be sought for tough control measures, which may have to be imposed, and public concern will be alleviated.
- 2.2 The management of news of a suspected or confirmed outbreak through appropriate communication channels is particularly important in the first few hours.
- 2.3 It is also important that DAF's messages be clear, consistent, straightforward and frequently repeated. An information vacuum, which would quickly undermine public confidence, must be avoided.
- 2.4 There will be three broad phases to the communications challenge: an initial intense media focus, a period of stabilisation and finally more routine communications during the recovery phase.
- 2.5 In the first phase, in particular, media demands can be extremely heavy. Adequate resources and attention must be devoted to this area, which is vital to ensuring public support for the effort to prevent or contain the disease.

## **3. EXTERNAL THREAT**

- 3.1 When a real threat of FMD emerges the public must be advised of the precautions being taken. This will involve the use of advertising and other communication channels (website, aertel, press releases) as well as direct mail shots to the farming community.
- 3.2 In the first instance media will seek information from DAF. It is important, therefore, that the Department's communication systems are able to respond without delay.
- 3.3 The Department's intranet (Ezone), e-mail and SMS will be used to capture and co-ordinate latest information on the threat. Designated additional resources will be made available for communications and plans for telephone help-lines will be activated.

## 4. DISEASE OUTBREAK

In the event of a disease outbreak extensive publicity will be required to explain the control measures being taken and to maintain support for them. In addition, national and international media attention will focus on the Department both at **Headquarters** and at the **LDCCs**. Additional resources, in particular staff with press office experience, will be required for communications work, especially in the case of multiple outbreaks. This will be arranged in conjunction with the Government Information Services and Press Offices in other Government Departments. Press officers at headquarters will be accessible 24 hours a day.

### 4.1 Headquarters

#### a) Press briefings

The media campaign will be directed from headquarters. This will involve the organisation of daily press briefings at national level given by the Minister and senior officers to:

- provide up-to-the-minute reports on the disease situation
- provide details of latest precautions/control measures
- address current concerns.

In addition, press visits to operational areas under controlled conditions will be arranged. This will serve to help avoid uncontrolled media access to restricted areas with consequent risk of disease spread. In 2001, an early afternoon briefing was used to facilitate data collation and meet editorial deadlines.

#### b) Press releases

Press releases will be issued to supplement daily briefings and to meet the needs of international and countrywide media.

#### c) Internet/Aertel

There is a page on FMD on the Department's website home page. This will be expanded and updated constantly with the latest disease situation, chronology of events, press releases, details of movements, permits, etc, as well as standard versions of posters/information notices to be downloaded and printed as required. Specific pages will provide advice on biosecurity measures, advice for travellers and advice for importers/exporters. Aertel pages will be expanded and used in the same way. A person will be assigned to maintain the website and to monitor (and rectify as necessary) information on other websites. During the FMD outbreak in 2001 the DAF website had up to 600,000 hits a week.

#### d) Telephone help-lines

- Lo-call telephone help-lines will be activated immediately, on a seven-day week basis, to relieve pressure on normal telephone lines. A staff rota system will be used to ensure the help-lines are properly staffed (An example of such a rota system is given in Chapter 7, **Staffing and Logistics**). In 2001, the help-line was staffed by 48 people, operating 4 shifts per day. A peak of 2,500 calls was recorded in one day. The provision of a free-phone help-line in the initial stage led to abuse, and hence lo-call help-lines were introduced.

Question and answer briefing material, prepared in advance, will be provided to help-line staff and a nominated veterinary officer will provide support as required. Help-lines will record topics of concern/public viewpoint to allow such to be addressed. Contracting out of help-line operation may become necessary if demand is exceedingly heavy.

- The manager of the help-line will liaise with staff from the NDCC, Expert Advisory Group, National Beef Assurance System and Animal Health and Welfare Division regarding up-to-date rules, protocols, disease situation etc.

#### e) Advertising/public announcements

TV, radio and newspaper advertisements and announcements will be prepared with simple, straightforward messages. These will be placed in national and provincial media, as appropriate.

### 4.2 Local Level

- a) A Press Office Liaison Officer will be assigned to LDCCs to manage information requirements and, in association with the headquarters Press Office, to co-ordinate arrangements for local media briefings.
- b) Local meetings with farmers will be held daily or as required to facilitate direct communication with those most affected by the control/eradication measures. The media may be allowed to attend for part of these meetings as appropriate.
- c) Early contact should be made with local papers and radio stations. The veterinary officer in charge at the LDCC should use local media to provide information to farmers and the general public on both the general and the specific precautions they should take, on the details of the operation of the zones, and the various specific control measures being implemented.
- d) Local, national and international media may well seek to obtain information from individual officers as well as the senior officer at the LDCC. All personnel at LDCC level should be advised that that **all disease related information is confidential and that under no circumstances should DAF personnel provide information on any aspect of disease control without prior approval from senior officers at Headquarters.**

- e) In consultation with the DAF Press Officer, senior officers at Headquarters may designate a local spokesperson. This individual will normally be the senior officer. However, he or she may delegate this task if it interferes with the other essential activities.
- f) DAF will establish a local Press Office, remote from the LDCC, from which all official statements will be issued and press briefings will be given.

Detailed information on LDCC communications are provided in Section 7, Chapter 13, **Local Disease Control Centre**.