

COMMUNICATING WITH THE DEAF COMMUNITY DURING A MAJOR INCIDENT AND OTHER EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

1. Introduction

This paper outlines current procedures for informing the media and wider public about emergency situations and major incidents. It looks at any gaps in the delivery of that information to the deaf community and proposes some solutions.

While this paper focuses on the information released from Greater Glasgow NHS Board, it is recognised that this issue will also relate to other organisations and services involved in issuing public information, with the potential to take it to a national level.

2. Current Methods for Communicating during Major Incidents

Greater Glasgow NHS Board relies heavily on the media during major incidents and other emergency situations, to get information quickly and accurately to the public. Although once the public have heard locally about an incident, a substantial number of inquiries will come in direct (usually to the Department of Public Health Medicine).

Communication with the media is routed through the NHS Board's Press Office. Once an incident has occurred or, where it is known that an incident is about to occur, the Press Office will liaise with NHS Board personnel and the Press Offices of any other agencies involved before agreeing a response to the media inquiries. The initial communications usually take place by telephone and fax. As the situation develops, the NHS Board issues updated statements and news releases.

The NHS Board has an emergency media fax list that includes all the national papers, local papers, major TV and radio outlets, the Scottish Executive and other Glasgow Trust Press Offices.

If the incident calls for a helpline to be set up, this information would be relayed to the public through the news release and may utilize in house Helpline arrangements, NHS 24 or the SECC emergency Information Line

The same plan of action would operate if the incident occurred outwith normal working hours.

3. Researching User Needs

In general, deaf people are unaware of major emergency incidents due to lack of access to information. News-flashes are not always subtitled, and do not always have sign language interpreters; leaflets and flyers are often too slow; radio broadcasts naturally exclude deaf people; and newspapers do not offer the immediacy of TV. Depending on the nature of the incident, missing this vital information can give rise to possible injury, ill health or death.

The Burncrooks incident involving diesel in the mains water supply illustrates the problem. A deaf person noticed an unusual smell in the water and, not being aware of the news, was uncertain whether it was drinkable. It was only when a neighbour told the deaf person that the water was unsafe to drink that the person was made aware of the emergency.

The estimated number of deaf and hard of hearing people in Glasgow is 95,888^{*1}. (Mild/moderate deafness – 88,794, severe/profound – 7,094). There are also an estimated 750 British Sign

¹ The figure is from the Video Information Project (Glasgow) and based on extrapolations from the Scottish Statistics on Deafness (RNID) and UK Child Deafness Statistics (NDCS) on an equal rotation basis.

Language users in Glasgow. **These figures indicate that there are a sizeable number of deaf people who are vulnerable during any emergencies.**

Discussions have taken place with two focus groups locally on the issue of emergency communications with deaf people and their feedback has been taken into account when drafting the proposed solutions. There are two distinct groups we need to communicate with, people who can read English and people whose first language is British Sign Language, it **must** be remembered that people in the latter category will have a “reading” age of 7 years; all communications must reflect that fact.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

4. Television

It is recognised that television requirements need to cover two aspects: the needs of those who can read subtitles, and the needs of those whose first language is British Sign Language. Discussions with the media and service users have highlighted the need for a balance of both.

News programmes are generally subtitled through the teletext 888 service, with the headlines at the end signed by an interpreter. The former is only accessible to those who have a teletext function on their TV. **For major incidents, on-screen subtitles for the incident news bulletins must become the accepted normal practice.** It would also be useful to prompt viewers to a dedicated teletext page that could offer further background on the incident.

Where a helpline has been set up, there should also be a textphone facility. This number should also be made available during the news bulletin. Not all deaf people have textphones, or they may not be registered with Typetalk, (the British Telecom/Royal National Institute for the Deaf support service for textphone users).

Links with STV and BBC should be established to develop a package that would see: -

- **Fully signed and subtitled throughout the broadcast**
- **Links to teletext pages carrying relevant background information for the duration of the incident**
- **The use of dedicated teletext pages so users can get accustomed to checking the pages for updates.** (This would be particularly beneficial for other agencies' information – which may not have health implications.)

As technology advances, particularly in respect of digital and online services, it is hoped that the use of computerised signing will be possible on teletext pages.

5. Alerting – Message Master

The main problem has been in respect of alerting the Deaf Community to important safety information on Ceefax pages. To investigate a potential solution to this problem, Greater Glasgow NHS Board held a trial of the “Message Master” system in April 2002. The system allows the group transmission to established lists of E-mail, Fax or SMS numbers (lists may be a mixture of all three). The message may be sent in full to E-mail and Fax addresses and the title of the message to SMS recipients, this system could alert all registered individuals to detailed information on Ceefax pages. The system may also be used by other organisations taking advantage of the GGHB contract, we would issue a Pin Number which would allow access to our lists or the creation of organisations own specific lists, the only charge would be for the actual messages sent.

The trial proved extremely successful and was fully evaluated by Market Research UK, these details are available separately.

6. Potential users and types of message.

NHS

- **Public Health Warnings**
- water pollution
- epidemics
- food safety
- drug
- dental
- chemical incidents/radiation
- health risks (holiday travel)

- **Health Promotion**
- general health campaigns

- **Commissioning**
- contact user groups

- **General**
- Health Board activities
- hospital information
- primary care information
- patient re-calls
- industrial disputes affecting health care

- **Major Incidents**
- all of the above
- general information and support
- national/international disasters

NON - NHS

- **Police/Fire/Coastguard**
- Public Safety e.g. (a) missing chemicals
- canisters on sea shore
- event safety
- major road closure
- public transport
- chemical/radiation/gas

- **Utilities**
- failures (water/gas/electricity/post office)
- weather
- dial a bus

- **Local Authorities**
- Social Services
- meals on wheels etc
- counselling and support
- schools
- housing
- cleansing/environmental services

- culture and leisure (special needs)
- transport (school buses)
- **Voluntary Organisations**
- WRVS
- Red Cross (international relief)

7. Written Media

The NHS Board maintains close links with the major Scottish and UK newspapers. Links with specialist magazines are also set up and the NHS Board will continue to develop close liaison with media servicing deaf and hard of hearing readers. Due to the immediacy of the information to be conveyed, the written media would not be a key player for this sector. Although these links will be very useful when we are at the stage of launching the proposed services available through television, a long lead in will be required, as these magazines tend to publish bi-monthly.

8. Methods of Communication preferred by the Deaf Community

Accurate facts and figures about members of the deaf community who have useful appliances are extremely difficult to find. However, recently the RNID (Royal National Institute for Deaf People) held a postal survey amongst readers of the *One in Seven* journal. The total number of responses was 1,669 (approximately one third of the responses were from profoundly deaf people). Part of the summary is given below.

<i>Teletext televisions:</i>	84% of <55 year-olds have Teletext TVs 65% of >65 year-olds have Teletext TVs
<i>Textphones:</i>	35% have textphones
<i>Fax machines:</i>	19% have fax machines
<i>E-mail:</i>	13% have e-mail (Including 23% of <55year-olds and 5% of >65 year-olds)
<i>Mobile phones:</i>	5% have mobile phones
<i>Pagers:</i>	No figures available

In order to try to clarify the situation in Glasgow, Greater Glasgow NHS Board conducted a survey of local Deaf Focus Groups, findings were:

Type	Used	Preferences
Ceefax	67.6%	22.9%
Fax	71%	54.3%
E-Mail	29.4%	15.2%
SMS	46.7%	27.6%
Pager (full)	13.3%	4.8%
Pager (alert)	9.5%	1%

Note – Use of SMS has the potential to increase substantially particularly amongst the young.

Typetalk has on its register 23,000-textphone users UK-wide. (Note: not all textphones users are registered with Typetalk – this implies that the number of textphone users UK-wide is *larger* than 23,000. By extrapolation, assuming that Glasgow has 1.5% of UK population, this could mean that there are at least 350 textphone users in Glasgow).

9. Recommendations

- **The use of Teletext/Oracle should be advanced with the appropriate service providers. This should include a nationally agreed protocol of standard messages and alerting procedures and, encourage the creation and use of a dedicated text page number.**
- **Both BBC and STV should be encouraged to increase their use of sub-titling on all news broadcasts, which feature Major Incidents or incidents affecting public safety. These sub-titles should be on the standard broadcast channels and not rely on text pages. In addition, the increased use of signers in these situations should be encouraged.**
- **The use of the Message Master (or similar approved) system is encouraged on a National basis allowing the Deaf to register to receive emergency information throughout Scotland.**
- **Public Health Medicine should review existing standard health warning messages and produce adapted versions for use on teletext/oracle. These messages should be aimed at the level of literacy of deaf viewers.**
- **Protocols for the use of Helplines should include special needs groups as a fundamental principal. It is recognised that we need to look at similar supports for other marginalised groups in the medium term.**

GGHB Emergency planning for the Deaf Group

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