Safety events:

planning the immediate media response

How to use this document

This document presents a set of steps for planning the immediate media response to a vaccine safety-related event.

Use the document as a starting point for internal discussions and for planning interaction with the media.

Use the document together with the WHO supporting document "How to ensure a context-specific response to events that may erode trust.

How was this document developed?

This document is part of a WHO series of supporting documents concerning events that could erode confidence in vaccination. Such events can be related to vaccine safety, adverse events following immunization, changes in the vaccination programme, negative public debate, outbreaks or pandemics.

All documents were developed based on scientific evidence, laboratory research and fieldwork within psychology, social and behavioural science and communication and lessons learnt in countries. For an introduction to the theoretical background and evidence, refer to the WHO publication *Vaccination and trust*, available here: **www.euro.who.int/vaccinetrust.**

The supporting documents are intended for use by national

- ministries of health
- centers for disease control
- immunization programmes
- regulatory authority institutions.

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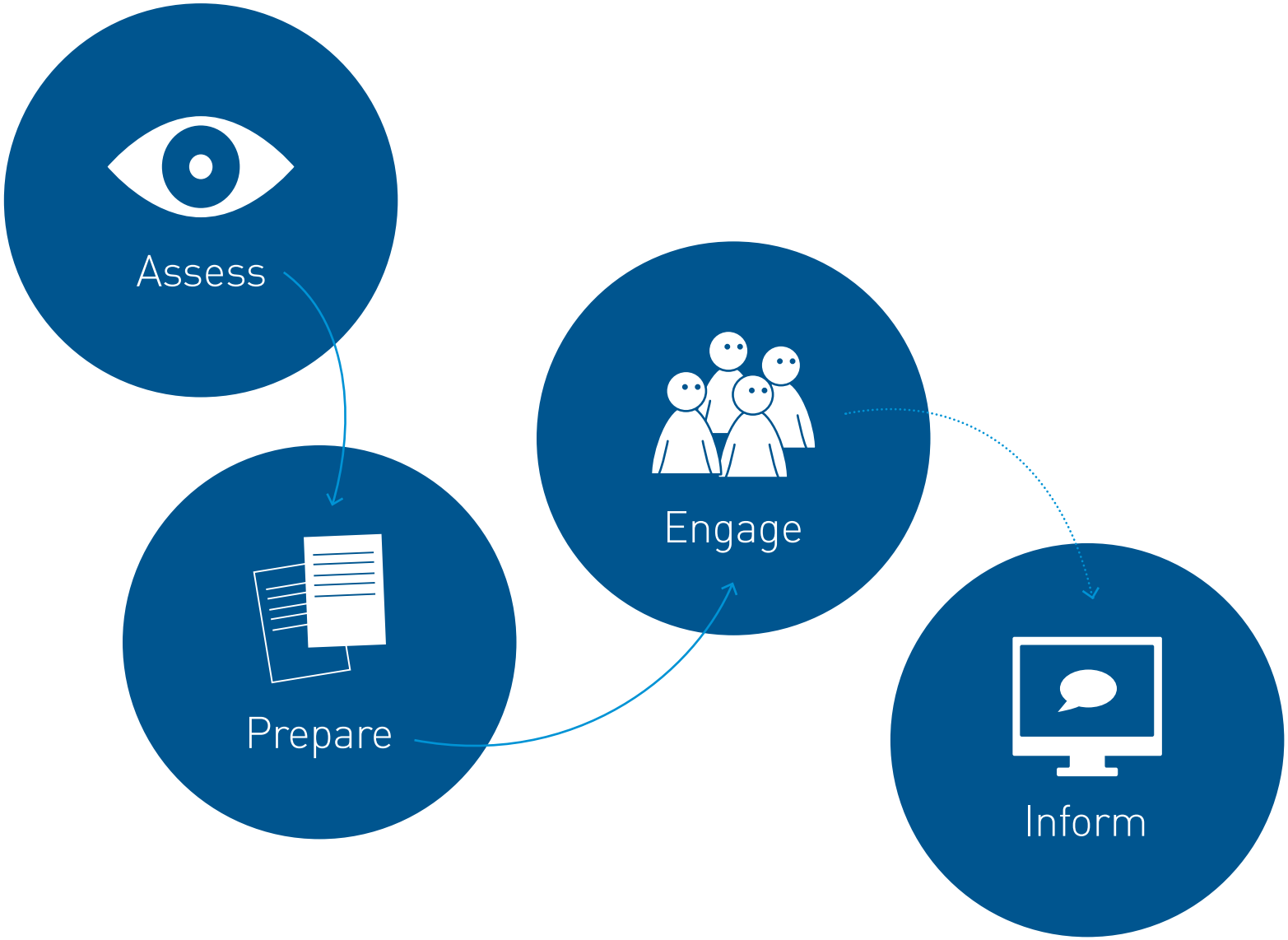
Vaccine safety-related events are events that may potentially erode confidence in vaccines and in the health authorities delivering them.

To counteract this, you need to immediately consider the appropriate response and to plan for potential interaction with the media.

Vaccine safety-related events include:

- unwanted events that are rightly or wrongly connected with vaccination,
- changes in the immunization programme,
- public and media debate on vaccination.



Assess the need to inform the media

Consider this carefully based on the situation in your country.

- If you expect media and public interest, you may proactively inform the media– rather than wait for them to take up the story themselves. This will allow you to present the facts and the right framework for the story.
- Be aware that some aspects increase public and media interest: uncertainty; children/pregnant women affected; events that evoke fears; events during a mass immunization campaign; events related to a new vaccine; social media attention; credibility of the story; similarities to past crisis events.
- If the link between vaccination and the event(s) is not plausible, if parents/ health care workers are not themselves considering any link, and if any public or media attention is considered unlikely, it may be decided that there is no need to create unnecessary public concern by drawing attention to the events.

Prepare carefully

No matter which approach is decided on: careful preparations should be made.

- Make sure you have
  - a clear understanding of all facts – not just about the safety event(s), but also about background rates, the disease, the vaccine used, the ongoing campaign/routine programme, other AEFIs reported recently or during the past year etc. **(see next page)**.
  - Prepared answers to any possible difficult questions that may be asked (reflecting facts mentioned above).
  - Key messages (see points a-f).
  - Trained spokespersons who know and have rehearsed the key messages.
  - Access for media to informed spokespersons and experts, so that all questions are answered.
  - If deemed relevant: hotlines for questions from the public and/or media.
- Monitor the media to understand rumours, concerns and perceptions in the public.

Engage stakeholders to prevent mixed messages

No matter which approach is decided upon: consider which stakeholders are involved and who may be approached by media, and liaise with them.

- Stakeholders may include National Regulatory Authority (NRA), national immunization programme, Ministry of Health (MoH) communications and spokespersons, experts, advisors, National Immunization Technical Advisory Group (NITAG) members, regional/local authorities and experts, partners and others.
  - Share messages and make sure they know the answers to difficult questions.
  - Share regular information updates with all relevant stakeholders.
  - Inform them about designated spokespersons, and advise them to refer to designated spokespersons if they are approached by the media.

Inform the media

If a proactive approach is decided upon: prepare carefully before facing the media and public. Rehearse messages based on the situation, including about the following:

a the events (all facts should be presented),

b whether it is likely/unlikely that the event(s) have a causal link with the vaccine/vaccination (you may wish to make it clear that there are no indications of a link, if this is the case),

c steps taken to investigate the event (all details about the scope and purpose of the investigation should be presented),

d next steps, timing and an indication of when/how/where a final conclusion of the investigation will be shared with the public,

e your deepest sympathy with the parents and children who have suffered (no matter the cause),

f your reassurance about complete transparency in this matter.

A clear understanding of all facts

Before you face the media and other key stakeholders you need to prepare carefully so that you are able to answer all questions.

Collect information about:

The disease which the vaccine prevents: how severe it is, its indications, how many cases a year in your country, how many hospitalizations a year in your country, age group it affects, what causes the diseases etc.

To **READ MORE** refer to:
- *The questions journalists always ask in a crisis*

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The vaccine: type of vaccine (live, live attenuated, inactivated, conjugate, subunit, toxoid), how it infects cells, how the immune system responds to it, what the vaccine is composed of, contraindications and false contraindications etc.

Rationale for the vaccine (for including it in the routine programme, for introducing it or for conducting supplementary activities): studies conducted, disease burden data, cost-effectiveness analysis, evidence from other countries, WHO recommendations etc.

Possible adverse events: list of possible adverse events associated with the vaccine and how frequent they are. Detailed information about the indications of adverse events, including possible time span following vaccination. Previous experience from your own or other countries that introduced the vaccine, including possible rumours, misperceptions and media stories.

Background rates for the possible AEFIs: frequency of these events in your country, among the target group and during the relevant time of year, so that any claim of an increase in these events can be disproved or confirmed.

The situation: facts about the routine programme and, if relevant, about the supplementary immunization activities/ campaign, targets set, sites of vaccination, overview of AEFIs reported for other vaccines, recently or during the year. Any possible misperceptions or rumours circulating, e.g. on social media.

Target groups for the vaccine: gender, age, specific population groups or geographical areas targeted etc.

If a new vaccine – how you prepared for the new vaccine introduction: trainings conducted, information materials produced, stakeholders engaged etc.

To **READ MORE** refer to:
- *Differentiating coincidental events from events that are caused by immunization: assessing rates*

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