

VA/DoD Risk Communication Review of Websites and Social Media: Camp Lejeune Historic Water Contamination and Health Concerns

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Media/social media reports studied were provided by ICF, Inc. under contract with the Marine Corps. The authors were members of a Risk Communications Subcommittee that is advisory to the DoD/VA Deployment Health Work Group, which largely focuses on collaborating on programs and research on military environmental exposures.

Background

- From the 1950s through the 1980s, people living or working at the U.S. Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, were potentially exposed to drinking water contaminated with industrial solvents, benzene, and other volatile organic chemicals.
- Law enacted August 6, 2012, requires VA to provide health care related to 15 conditions to Veterans and family members who served or resided in Camp Lejeune from 1957 to 1987.
- Per the law, this care will be provided “notwithstanding that there is insufficient medical evidence to conclude that such illnesses or conditions are attributable to such service.”

Goals of the project

- Ensuring consistency between websites
- Identifying message gaps or needs
- Making Federal web sites (and staff) more responsive to the concerns of Veterans, family members, Servicemembers, and the public
- Listening to the Veteran voice via social media comments

Risk communication

- Defined as “an interactive process of exchange of information and opinions among individuals, groups, and institutions, concerning a risk or potential risk to human health or the environment. Risk communication involves multiple messages about the nature of risk and other messages not strictly about risk that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management.” (National Research Council, 1989)
- Is a scientific discipline with many theories supporting its practice
- Involves understanding risk perception

- Is less about “correcting” and more about understanding perceptions (risk perception is not misperception!)
- Can facilitate the exchange of health and scientific information between various stakeholders
- Recognizes several risk perception factors that shape understanding of risk
- Provides a different view of risk than medical, scientific, and government staff

Risk perception factors

<u>High</u>	<u>Low</u>
Involuntary	Voluntary
Man-made	Natural
Controlled by Others	Controlled Personally
Exotic	Familiar
Permanent	Reversible
Affecting Children	Affecting Adults
Uncertainty	Certainty
Untrusted	Trusted
Unfairly Distributed	Fairly Distributed

The greater the number of high risk factors, the greater the concern (and the lower the trust), and the more risk communication approaches should be considered.

Methods

Website review

- Determined key elements, developed a review form
- Examined a sample: ten pages - two VA sites, Marine Corp site, ATSDR site

Public comments/social media review

- Marine Corps public affairs provided 7 months of weekly reports on media, social media (about 400 pages)
- Subcommittee developed assessment form
- Reports sampled so that at least one week per month covered between July and January (law passed in August)

Themes of public comments from social media samples

- Cover up/conspiracy
- Lack of trust
- Advocate, documentary as important and trusted sources
- Questioning VA readiness and capability
- Appreciation to President for signing the law
- “It’s not enough”
- Was I affected?
- Other bases, other contamination
- Concerns about cancer, including breast cancer

- Concerns about other illnesses
- More contamination (current, 1953)
- Spread the word (exposures, law)
- Don't forget
- Anger at the government
- Need to take legal action
- Need more information

Recommendations

Federal websites

- Provide date information carefully and in context
- Use the word "historic" concerning the contamination at Camp Lejeune
- Use care when using the word "claim" (health care, compensation, tort claims)
- Where possible the concept of exposure should be qualified

Public comments

- Use messages and approaches that address public concerns

Results: Overarching risk communications approaches for all staff

1. **Remember to show empathy, compassion, and respect**
2. **Always consider what the public might perceive and understand what their concerns are. Perceptions are reality; seek ways to know public concerns.**
3. **Be transparent, be factual; provide what is known and not known and what is being done regarding the law, health concerns, research.**
4. **Focus on the positive, what the Department can do, what the audience can do.**
5. **Be attentive to wording, being sure to be clear, helpful, accurate, and consistent.**
6. **Actively and regularly provide information and updates.**

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Sample social media comments by the public, Veterans, family members

- *"The government has covered up so much you wouldn't believe. I was stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, our water system on base was contaminated by fuel tanks leaking, it was covered up none of us were told about it and now we are paying the price..."*
- *"MY NAME IS SALLY I NOW LIVE IN ALABAMA, DO ANYONE BELIEVE THAT CAMP LEJEUNE WILL PAY US FOR OUR SUFFERING? JUST WANT TO KNOW"*
- *"Thank you, Mr President"... "It's great the Government has finally owned up to this and are now helping those military personnel affected."*
- *"But what about the civilians that work on base along side the military personnel?"*
- *"I served there 85-87. I currently show no symptoms, but that doesnt mean I dont have anything as i have no health care and therefore probably wont find out till its too late."*
- *"For several months I had to live completely submerged in amniotic fluid made of the water Camp Lejeune provided for the soldiers and their families. I have several illnesses and would like to know if they are on the list of side effects of these chemicals."*
- *"I'm just sick over this. My family lived in Camp Lejeune when this all was happening. We heard about it, but didn't know it was SO huge. Major water contamination for 30 years! The drinking water! The water I drank as a small child. The water we bathed in."*
- *"MARINES..if you were at Camp Lejeune between 1957 & 1987 U were probably exposed to Toxic water. Google Camp Lejeune water U will be shocked"*

- *"This is just plain disgusting. People who are willing to put their lives on the line for us deserve the best treatment and consideration imaginable, not typical bureaucratic stonewalling and disrespect, even if they never see one day of combat/never leave U.S. soil. So do their families!"*
- *"Let's see if I have this straight? Go to Lejeune and compromise your health with contaminated water. Go to Viet Nam and get exposed to Agent Orange. Come home, get treated like garbage, and when you get diagnosed with cancer you have to fight with the VA to get some assistance."*
- *"I was born on base in 1957, and live on base with my parents, how do I find out more about this?"*
- *"It's made the news but the Military aka federal gov't have NOT contacted all the families who lived at Camp Lejeune to warn them that the water that we drank, bathed in, cooked and swam in was contaminated."*
- *"I love how they say it has been and will continue to be difficult to track everyone down who lived there. I bet if they owed federal taxes they could find them".*

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- VA - <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/camp-lejeune/index.asp>
- Marine Corps - <https://clnr.hqi.usmc.mil/clwater/>
- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry - <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/sites/lejeune/>

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