

Abstract

Risk communication is a vital component of the daily functions and responsibilities in a public health department. In order to keep up with the rapidly evolving field of environmental health and to meet the growing demands of the public, public health departments must recognize the importance of devoting resources and time to educating staff in the techniques and methods of risk communication. Public health departments must examine their risk communication efforts closely in order to determine if they are effective and if not to make improvements in the future. This research project examines the risk communication efforts provided by the public health professionals at the City of Hamilton Public Health and Community Services Department in the case of St. Mary's Catholic High School and the concerns of indoor air quality pertaining to poor ventilation and elevated carbon dioxide levels in the portables at the school. This paper consists of a case study presented in three parts: the first part is a literature review of risk communication theory which presents accepted wisdom and recommendations in the field of risk communication; the second part defines the problem in the community and the responses to it by the authorities; and finally the third part consists of the analysis of the problem by incorporating the material presented in the first and second part of the case study, in order to produce a set of critical observations and judgements that should inform and assist future challenges. Although the data obtained from the study were too few to make any solid deductions and conclusions, some very important information was obtained that can be used to inform and assist the City of Hamilton Public Health and Community Services Department in future challenges. The study suggests that both the first and second goals of risk communication were achieved and that a bigger, more comprehensive study involving the main stakeholders, the parents and students, would be needed to conduct a definitive analysis of the situation in this particular case.