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PREPARING DEMOCRACIES FOR PANDEMICS

Pandemic communications: follow the science but lead with psychology

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The evolving pandemic has exposed weaknesses in our society. This is particularly obvious in countries where democracy and autonomy are paramount.¹ “Follow the science” is a phrase we hear from politicians. But science is not a straight and narrow stream that flows steadily in one direction. It often meanders along, taking the occasional wrong turn, trying to course around areas of resistance. Eventually, it finds a way through when the strength of evidence is clear.

Politicians could probably find the science that conveniently supports their beliefs—this has been the case in the past.² We need to be wary, particularly in a pandemic as the science is finding its way. Politicians and the public need to understand that the science can and does change and that we must be agile in responding to it rather than see every scientific correction as evidence of incompetence.

Countries that are failing to control spread of the virus are probably those in which communication has not been coherent. People have received mixed messages, a poor form of communication that causes confusion, which is magnified when people are frightened. Despite leaders’ best attempts to persuade disbelievers to follow the science, many continue to reject it. Communication is best done with a mixture of humility, empathy, and clarity that encourages public confidence in leadership and in the science and wins the hearts and minds of autonomous people.

Leaders need to be empathetic towards those who won’t follow the science and use them as the control group to create the science for future generations. Humanity doesn’t always do what is in its best interest. But using an appropriate mix of science and psychology will support leadership on the path towards getting us out of this raging torrent.

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Full response at: <https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4088/rr-0>.

¹ Bollyky TJ, Kickbusch I. Preparing democracies for pandemics. *BMJ* 2020;371:m4088. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m4088 pmid: 33097482

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