Strategies used by journalists during interviews or press conferences

How to use this document

This document presents some examples of the different strategies and kinds of questions that journalists use and suggestions to how you may respond to these.

Being prepared for journalistic tactics makes it easier to respond and to return to your own key messages, and you will not as easily feel that you were tricked into saying something you did not intend to say.

Use the document for spokesperson training and to rehearse your key messages.

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.
Strategies used by journalists and possible response mechanisms

**Strategy: Speculation**
- Example of question posed by journalist
  - What could happen if...?
  - How do you think this could happen...?
  - Can you offer a guess as to how it happened...?
- Guidance
  - Do not go along with speculation.
  - If possible and relevant, bridge back to your key message.
- Examples of how you may respond
  - I would not want to speculate on that. The facts are....
  - It is important that we deal with the facts as we know them, and they are....
  - It is too early to tell. We will have a full evaluation and find out what happened.

**Strategy: Hearsay**
- Example of question posed by journalist
  - Dr Smith from the Health Education Bureau told us that....
  - A source from within the Ministry of Health told us....
  - How do you respond to the WHO country office, which said...
  - Our sources tell us...
- Guidance
  - Do not demean the source of their information.
  - Bridge back to your key message.
- Examples of how you may respond
  - I cannot speak for Dr Smith, but what I can address is....
  - This is the information I have....
  - I would like to stick to the facts....
  - The facts are.....
  - This is what I know....

**Strategy: Negative slant**
- Example of question posed by journalist
  - Can you tell us about the child that died from measles vaccine..?
  - Am I right in assuming that this could have been easily avoided?
  - Why is your surveillance substandard?
- Guidance
  - Do not repeat the negative comment or word.
  - Correct any inaccuracy and bridge back to your key message.
- Examples of how you may respond
  - The truth is....
  - I will give you the facts as I have them....
  - Once again, let me share with you exactly what happened....

To READ MORE refer to:
- Tips for spokespersons
- How to prepare a message map
euro.who.int/vaccinetrust
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Strategy
Puts words in your mouth

Example of question posed by journalist
• So, your morale issue is affecting public health, isn’t it?

Guidance
• Their effort is to get you to use words you would not say.
• Do not argue.
• Bridge back to your key message.

Examples of how you may respond
• Let us see what is at issue here if I may… [then make your positive point].

Strategy
Presupposition
(reporter gives you false information to put you on the defensive)

Example of question posed by journalist
• Isn’t it true that the Ministry of Health diverted funding away from pandemic influenza preparedness and training to cover the cost of a new building in headquarters?

Guidance
• Do not repeat the negative comment or word.
• Bridge back to your key message.

Examples of how you may respond
• Let me give you the correct information….
• Actually this is what happened….
• The truth is….

Strategy
False facts
and incorrect information

Example of question posed by journalist
• So you have awarded 75% of your grants budget to study the adverse events of vaccination to just one organization?

Guidance
• If a reporter provides incorrect information, it is okay to correct them.
• Correct graciously and go to your key message.

Examples of how you may respond
• Perhaps I could clarify that for your [viewers, listeners, readers]…
• Actually this is what happened….
• That is not correct… the facts are that….

Strategy
The dangerous silence

You have given a good answer to a controversial issue… the reporter pauses and the camera continues to roll, thereby encouraging you to fill the silence.

Guidance
• Bridge back to your key message or stay silent until a new question is asked.
• Be comfortable with silence. It is the reporter’s job to fill the airtime.
• Do not answer questions they did not ask.

Bridging to your key messages

Example of bridging:

**Interview question:**
“Talking about pregnant women: Isn’t it true that the new pandemic influenza vaccine will have more side effects than a regular seasonal influenza vaccine because of the rapid development?”

**Interview answer:**
“Whilst it is true that there are some minor side effects, the outcomes of the studies completed to date suggest that the pandemic influenza vaccine is just as safe and has similar side effects as the seasonal influenza vaccine...

...The fact of the matter is that the benefits of this vaccine far outweigh the risks. Pregnant women have an elevated risk for severe illness and have a 10 times higher risk of hospitalization in intensive care units when infected by this new influenza.”