

Authority Paper

HUMAN FERTILISATION AND EMBRYOLOGY AUTHORITY

Committee:	Authority
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Paper Title:	HFEA Communication Strategy
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For Information or Decision?	For Information
Resource Implications:	Work on implementing the strategy is in the Business Plan for 2004/5
Recommendation to the Committee:	The Authority is requested to note the Communications Strategy. The document was discussed at the October Authority meeting and proposed activities are contained in the 2004/5 Business Plan. Regular reports will be provided to the Authority on the implementation of the strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines a new strategy for improving HFEA's communications to enhance its visibility and reputation with key audiences. This is designed to support the Authority's business objectives for 2004/5 and to shape a programme of communication activities over the next year.

2. CURRENT COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

HFEA has increased its range of communication activities over the past few years and achieved a great deal. *Appendix A* outlines the current main communication activities with our main audiences.

3. KEY COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES AND RISKS

3.1 HFEA faces a challenging environment in the regulation of fertility treatment and research, which affects its future role. Some of the key challenges creating different levels of risk to the HFEA are:

- **HFEA has experienced major changes over the past few years. It is essentially a new organisation with new leadership and management and is modernising its operations. Communicating those organisational changes and the resulting benefits effectively is essential given the high expectations from stakeholders about the need for change.**
- **Stakeholder consultation for the corporate and business plans in 2003 showed a strong demand for HFEA to become much more transparent about how it operates and makes its decisions, and to carry out better and faster consultation. Coupled with this is the Freedom of Information Act which places obligations on HFEA to provide more information.**
- **Recent high profile incidents at IVF clinics demonstrate the need for HFEA to operate strong regulation and prevent or minimise incidents occurring. Successful handling of crisis management surrounding a high profile incident will be key, not only in demonstrating public confidence in IVF, but also in the role of HFEA.**
- **A desire for stronger regulation is also prompted by media and public concerns over the pace of scientific change in IVF treatment and research and a fear that HFEA is unable to cope or provide the necessary public assurance. HFEA needs to be able to provide objective and authoritative information as part of a broader public education campaign in partnership with other bodies.**
- **The pace of change also highlights the need to keep a wide set of stakeholders informed about the safety of treatment and research. Building links with opinion formers, MPs and other groups are essential to build understanding and building trust.**
- **The review of the HFEA Act will open up a debate about the work and role of HFEA. Communicating our current role and views on need for change to the Act will be important.**
- **Patient relations will become even more important with growing consumerism in fertility treatment as well as growing NHS access. This includes demands for more consultation, accountability and handling complaints. Given the low public awareness of HFEA's role as a regulator then devising**

appropriate channels for communication are necessary as part of clear organisational policies on relations with patients.

- **The NICE guidelines will change NHS provision and there will be expectations from commissioners of services about HFEA's regulatory role.**
- **New scientific and technological developments will necessitate working alongside other bodies in the scientific and regulatory fields. Successful partnerships with other organisations are required.**

5.0 KEY AUDIENCES FOR HFEA

The Authority has a wide range of different audiences which we need to engage with.

4.1 Patients

Patients already receiving treatment or potential patients are core to HFEA. HFEA already operates a limited enquiry service for patients and the public, produces a Directory of Clinics and patient leaflets. Patient feedback is beginning to be incorporated in inspections. Good contacts exist with some of the patient groups and a recent survey from Infertility Network UK shows that its members are more aware of HFEA functions than other patients. Contact with individual patients is limited and their knowledge about what HFEA does is likely to be low. If HFEA is to act more like a watchdog then it will need to be better known to provide greater public assurance about safety, standards and performance.

4.2 Clinics

Regular contacts exist with clinics through the regulatory process and the incident alert system; the provision of information and channels such as HFEA Update, the new centres web site, the annual and research conferences, and the public authority meetings. In addition links with professional bodies provide an additional channel of communication. Gaining the trust of clinics is key to HFEA being supported as a regulator. It is vital to provide up to date information on decisions to ensure a greater transparency of HFEA and provide a high level of customer service. Contacts exist primarily with the PRs and senior staff but it is also important to ensure HFEA information and messages reach other staff.

4.3 Professional Bodies

Relations are maintained through regular meetings and attendance at key conferences and events. These bodies are an important conduit for

communicating HFEA's role to their members and well as being well placed commentators on HFEA. HFEA needs their support and endorsement. More needs to be done to ensure the relationships work fully through co-ordination, targeted information provided for members in a more efficient way and invitations to HFEA events.

4.4 Research and Scientific Bodies

A range of contacts exists with research and scientific bodies operating in the IVF field. With the increasing importance of research then it is important to maintain a good network of such bodies to help forge partnerships. They need to be sufficiently informed about the role of HFEA.

4.5 MPs and Parliamentarians

Some contacts exist with MPs on specific issues such as the recent sex selection report and the All Party Group on Fertility. There is also a web micro site for MPs. Beyond that communications are limited. MPs are a key group and therefore it is important to ensure relationships exist with key MPs, so they are adequately briefed to have confidence in HFEA's role. Work with the current Select Committee on Science and Technology Inquiry will be of key importance.

4.6 GPs, PCTs and Health Authorities

Links are limited although there are plans in place to communicate more widely with the NHS initially via the NHS Confederation. If PCTs become more significant commissioners of IVF services then they will need to be fully informed about HFEA's role. There are no systematic links with GPs at present although they play a key role in channelling information to patients. They need to know what role HFEA plays and what information can be provided to patients.

4.7 The Media

By virtue of their role in informing the public, opinion formers and decision makers, the Media are key targets for the HFEA. There is intense media interest in assisted reproductive technology and the HFEA has a unique and important role to play in commenting on treatment and research. It is the HFEA's statutory duty to publicise the services provided, by the Authority, to the public and encouraging informed journalism is one of the most effective ways of reaching this audience.

The recent success of the launch of the Sex Selection report demonstrates the value of a proactive approach to the media. In order to steer the agenda, a coherent media strategy is required which can take advantage of policy decisions.

There will, inevitably, be coverage of adverse incidents, scares about new research or treatments and legal cases. These can provide

opportunities for explaining our role and presenting the HFEA as a trusted commentator for developments within ART.

4.8 Other regulators and government bodies

Organisations such as CHAI, NCSC, HGC, MHRA, NPSA and other bodies overlap with HFEA's role. Maintaining relationships is important to ensure there is understanding of HFEA's role and work and there is a dialogue about the contribution made by HFEA and that regulation is co-ordinated.

4.9 Opinion Formers

This group consists of key commentators and key individuals from organisations who although not necessarily having a direct involvement in IVF shape opinion. They can provide endorsement of HFEA's role or can become vocal critics. Some ad hoc contacts exist with key individuals but a more extensive programme of contacts is required.

4.10 Pressure Groups

These will cover a range of issues. Some with specific concerns and some more hostile. Contacts exist on particular issues although there needs to a more systematic programme of contacts relevant to our field.

4.11 The Public

This is a very broad group composed of different levels of interest and views of IVF. Recognition of HFEA will inevitably be low amongst the general public. Potentially this is an expensive group to reach and would require innovative methods. There is a need to be clear about which sub groups are important to reach – for example, young women, and men; potential donors, and potential users of services and members of parenting groups.

5. COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

5.1 Clear aims are required for the strategy, not just to guide how activities are prioritised, but also to assess how communications are performing. The **key** objectives for the next year are:

- **Let key commentators and opinion formers know that change is underway at HFEA as part of a programme of modernisation in order to create trust in the organisation.**
- **Ensure that HFEA has the confidence of Ministers and the Department of Health in being able to act firmly and decisively and also ensure that MPs and other key decision makers positively support the role of HFEA.**

- **Establish in the public mind the perception of HFEA as a robust, independent and effective regulator acting in patients' and the public's interest.**
- **Communicate HFEA's views on the review of the HFEA Act and the Science and Technology Committee's Inquiry.**
- **Build links with the NHS, including PCTs and GPs.**
- **Build stronger links with clinics and centres to communicate HFEA's role and activities including developing two way communication.**
- **Create stronger links with patients both directly and through patient organisations to communicate HFEA's role and activities this being part of a new patient focus across HFEA's work.**
- **Promote public understanding about the safety of IVF and research in collaboration with other partners.**

6. KEY PRIORITIES FOR THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

6.1 Influencing opinion formers

Given the challenges to the Sector, the Review of the Act and the forthcoming EU Tissue Directive, it is important for the HFEA to build links with opinion formers. MPs and Parliamentarians are a key audience and so far there has only been limited contacts. Key activities for the next year are to

- **Build a contact programme with MPs, MEPs and Parliamentarians, including briefings on key issues**
- **Identify key opinion formers and develop a contact programme to increase their knowledge of and support for HFEA**

6.2 Increasing transparency of HFEA activities and decision-making

A start has been made with the HFEA update, the new website, the Research Conference, the Annual Conference and the public meetings of the Authority. More information needs to be provided as well as helping audiences to interact with HFEA. With clinics it is vital to ensure they have clear up to date information about HFEA. Key activities required are:

- **Improving corporate information provided through HFEA Update and the website**
- **Holding three public meetings of the Authority including at least one regional meeting**
- **Ensuring that summaries of Inspection Reports and Licence Committee outcomes are publicly available**
- **Improve the quality of the website in terms of accessibility of information and increasing interactivity**
- **Improving consultation processes on key issues and feedback on responses to consultation**

6.3 Improving Reputation Management

The Authority needs to improve relationships with all of its stakeholders. Involving them in and consulting with them on policy and regulatory developments. A detailed communication audit of audience contacts and relationships will be carried out in order to plan a relationship programme. The programme will include briefings for key organisations, specific meetings and attendance at events and conferences. Other key activities are

- **A targeted programme of contacts in the NHS, including PCTs and GPs**
- **A review of the role of the HFEA's Annual Conference, Research Conference and other corporate and consultation events**

6.4 Supporting and Involving Patients

A patient focus will become important in the work of HFEA. This needs to be part of a clear Patients Strategy in place across the organisation. This will include how the patients' perspective is incorporated into the work of HFEA, including the inspection process and the development of regulation. It will also need to include a programme for communicating with patient groups and more widely with patients. Key activities are

- **Setting up a Patients' Advisory Panel which will meet to advise HFEA on the patient dimension**
- **Develop a new system of responding to patient and public enquiries**

- **Develop a patient communication and information programme, including new patient leaflets, the 2004 Patients Guide, other patient information and a media programme**

6.5 Public information to increase understanding and trust

Communicating more widely HFEA's role as a regulator is a priority, given fears about standards and safety. HFEA, working alongside other bodies is also responsible for trying to increase confidence in the sector. Key activities include

- **Running a public consultation on issues around HLA Typing to gain the public's view on this issue and use this information in formulating policy.**
- **Identify likely risk areas to public confidence and produce briefings on high-profile issues**
- **Produce new leaflets for patients on key issues in assisted conception**

6.6 Increasing contact with the Media

Media work to date has involved responding quickly and efficiently to crises and working with the Scientific and Health Media. The Media programme needs to support the HFEA's business and communication objectives through a new coherent strategy. Key additional activities include

- **Supporting the patient communication programme through pro-active work with regional press, lifestyle magazines and women's magazines, in order to target patients and the public.**
- **Specialist briefings to journalists on anticipated issues likely to cause concern**

7.0 Delivering communications effectively

Good external communications will require organisational changes to maximise effectiveness.

7.1 Improving Internal Communications

With recent staff turnover and a new staff internal communications needs to be a major priority and pre-requisite for the communications strategy. Good internal communications and full staff awareness of the

goals and achievements of the organisation will enable staff to communicate effectively externally. Work has begun on an internal communication programme which includes a staff attitude survey and a briefing on key business issues and staff development. This will include making better use of the HFEA intranet for communicating knowledge and information across the organisation.

7.2 Communication planning

New organisational and process improvements will be introduced to equip the organisation to communicate more effectively in the future. Core to this is ensuring that communications is at the heart of decision making and through communication planning ensure that the communications implications of decisions and actions are identified from the outset. Training and support will be provided for staff. Campaigns on selected themes will be devised on issues such as regulation, patient safety, regulatory research as part of the ongoing communication programme. This will shape the products and activities of HFEA and require more emphasis on marketing to audiences. Also important is the introduction of a more formal early warning system to understand potential threats to HFEA's reputation and a crisis management system to handle adverse media coverage or other major challenges. Planning will also involve keeping the Department of Health and key stakeholders informed in advance about initiatives and announcements.

7.3 Developing a clear corporate Identity

HFEA needs a strong corporate identity to enhance its visibility. This requires a strong visual image in all publications and the web site as well as a distinct editorial style in all written material (which will be dependent on the particular audience for each piece of material, eg patient, MP or press briefing, communication with clinics etc). Equally important is the need for messages about the organisation that need to be clear, consistent and relevant. All written material needs to be in plain English.

7.4 Improving electronic communication

The first phase of the new website is completed and work now underway on developing the centres only website. The web needs to be core to how HFEA communicates in the future acting as the main channel for customised information targeted at different audiences. More needs to be done to promote interaction with audiences via the web including an email alert on new issues and an audience feedback section on HFEA's work.

7.5 Using authority members

Authority members are valuable ambassadors for HFEA and they need to be supported fully to perform this important role. Providing co-ordination of external work and support is important for example briefings and support in giving presentations. The potential of a database of Members' contacts for use in contacting opinion formers will be explored.

8. EVALUATING PERFORMANCE

Essential to any strategy is a clear set of measures to check whether it is working and shape its development. This assessment needs to be built into decision-making through a number of complimentary methods which require targets and clear measures. This could include:

- **Analysis of media coverage**
- **Quantitative analysis of key publicity campaigns to assess effectiveness**
- **Satisfaction survey of our key audiences to track attitudes every two years**
- **Usage of the website**
- **Ongoing feedback, including customer complaints**
- **Quality and quantity of contacts formed through networking**
- **Feedback from events**

APPENDIX A

HFEA CURRENT COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

Publications

- Annual Report
- Business Plan
- Patient Guides
- Patients Leaflets
- Code of Practice

HFEA Meetings

- Key stakeholder organisations
- Programme of meetings with other regulators e.g. CHI, CHAI NHSC etc.

HFEA Web Site

- Targeted at media, clinics and patients

Patient Enquiries

- Responding to patient enquiries
- Handling patient complaints

Media Relations

- Press releases
- Media briefings
- Media interviews
- Press conferences
- Articles for newspapers and magazines

Other Meetings

- Chair and CE speeches at key conferences
- Participation in major conferences
- Exhibitions

Internal Communications

- CE briefing
- Cascade briefings in departments
- HFEA intranet
- Training and Seminars

HFEA Events

- Consultation events e.g. Code of Practice, Sex Selection
- Annual Conference
- Research Conference