

# Communicating Risks of Influenza Outbreaks to Sarawak Rural Communities: What Do We Know?

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The global threat of pandemic influenza is widely acknowledged in the literature. A study that was published in 2012 estimated that the number of death related to influenza H1N1 infection, for the first 12 months of 2009 influenza virus circulation, is between 151,700 and 575,400 people. Malaysia experienced the first H1N1 outbreak between April and September 2009. To date, there have been several more new cases of H1N1 outbreaks in Malaysia reported in the news.

The ultimate aim of this research is to develop a workable and adaptable framework that can clearly illuminate the participation of the interrelated systems within the local context. This framework will address the effective ways of communicating health information that promotes empowerment of rural communities to have an effective self-care practice, which no doubt can curb the potential spread of outbreaks. The research team comprises members from FEB, FRST and FMHS, and also, two MSc research students.

The outcomes from the first phase, which investigated and assessed the level of awareness and attitudes of Serian and Baram communities, revealed several interesting findings. Based on the survey outcomes (Baram and Serian), we found a relatively low level of knowledge and awareness particularly about the characteristics of the illness and how H1N1 virus can transmit. A majority of the survey respondents (Baram and Serian) however reported good understanding and awareness about the effective self-care practices that can prevent the

influenza spread. In Serian, the top five sources to obtain information about the influenza were families, relatives, friends or neighbours, radio, television, newspapers, and government health talk seminars or campaigns. In Baram, only half of the respondents believed that H1N1 is an infectious disease.

The second phase of the project used data from a series of focus groups (conducted at Baram and Serian) and interviews to gain insights about how the interaction and relationship between multiple systems (family, community, healthcare agency and others) and the dissemination of health information can increase the individual understanding and awareness about the H1N1 risk and prevention. The focus group method has permitted us: to obtain useful data from the rural participants where the quantitative method such as survey is not feasible; to understand the interaction and communication styles of these communities, and to gain a deeper understanding about the impact of individual role in the family unit as well as in the community context; and to gather the rural participants who come from different ethnic group, age, gender as well as social class in the community within just a short period of time. Overall, this study engages System Theory to explore the context of rural communities in seeking, obtaining and using health information products related to pandemic influenza A H1N1 risk and prevention.

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Health Talk with the Communities at Long Bedian