

From Chaos to Clarity: Crisis Communications for Health Care Organizations

Why Crisis Communications Matter in Health Care

Health care organizations operate in one of the most complex and high-stakes environments. When a crisis occurs—whether a data breach, patient safety event, regulatory investigation, or public allegation—the consequences extend far beyond the incident itself.

For risk managers and senior leaders, crisis communications are a core risk control function, not a marketing exercise. Poorly managed communications can:

- Increase professional and institutional liability
- Trigger regulatory scrutiny or enforcement
- Erode patient and community trust
- Undermine physician and staff confidence
- Complicate claims defense and long-term reputation management

This handout highlights proven crisis response principles for hospitals, medical practices, and health systems, while integrating risk management, legal, and communications best practices.

1. Preparing Before a Crisis Occurs

Preparing for a crisis is the best way to lower reputational harm and create smoother regulatory and legal outcomes.

ESTABLISH A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Identify a standing crisis communications team in advance and integrate into existing incident response and risk frameworks. Typical members include:

- Executive leadership
- Legal counsel
- Risk management
- Compliance and privacy
- Communications or public affairs
- Clinical leadership (as needed)
- IT and cybersecurity leadership (for cyber events)

Leadership Imperative

Define crisis communications authority before a crisis. Confusion during an event increases both operational and reputational risks.

DESIGNATE AND PREPARE SPOKESPEOPLE

Train designated spokespeople in advance. Effective spokespeople are:

- Credible and knowledgeable
- Calm, professional, and empathetic
- Clear on legal and regulatory constraints

ANTICIPATE HIGH-RISK SCENARIOS

Risk managers should identify likely crisis scenarios, including:

- Ransomware and data breaches
- Serious patient safety events or clusters
- Regulatory investigations or surveys
- Criminal allegations, lawsuits, or whistleblower claims
- Social media-driven reputational issues

2. Responding When a Crisis Occurs

ACTIVATE CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IMMEDIATELY

Crisis communications should be activated concurrently with operational, clinical, legal, and IT responses.

Immediate priorities include:

- Establishing a single source of verified information
- Aligning leadership, legal, and communications teams
- Preventing inconsistent or unauthorized messaging

ALIGN LEGAL, REGULATORY, AND COMMUNICATIONS OBJECTIVES

Effective crisis response balances legal concerns with timely, human communication.

Best practices include:

- Understanding HIPAA and regulatory expectations
- Avoiding speculation or premature conclusions
- Communicating empathy without admitting fault

DEVELOP CLEAR, EMPATHETIC MESSAGING

Strong crisis messaging:

- Is factual and based on confirmed information
- Acknowledges uncertainty when appropriate
- Centers on patient and staff impact
- Avoids technical jargon
- Remains consistent across all channels

STAKEHOLDER-FIRST COMMUNICATIONS

Different stakeholders experience crises differently. Prioritization them is critical. Key stakeholder groups typically include:

- Patients and families
- Physicians and advanced practice providers
- Employees and contractors
- Regulators and accrediting bodies
- Media
- Boards, donors, and strategic partners



INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS ARE A VALUABLE RISK CONTROL TOOL

Employees are often the most influential messengers. Internal communications should:

- Provide timely, factual updates
- Reinforce confidentiality and media guidance
- Equip staff to respond appropriately to questions
- Acknowledge operational stress and uncertainty

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Media engagement should be deliberate and disciplined. Best practices include:

- Assume all communications are on the record
- Take time to prepare before responding; don't speculate
- Avoid discussing patient-specific details
- Engage rather than offering "no comment"

Reality Check

Silence is often interpreted as concealment. Thoughtful engagement helps ensure accuracy.

COMMON REAL-WORLD CHALLENGES

Health care leaders and risk managers should anticipate:

- Operational disruption under public scrutiny
- Misinformation spreading through social media
- Parallel legal, regulatory, and media pressures
- Leadership and staff fatigue over prolonged events

WHAT EFFECTIVE RESPONSES HAVE IN COMMON

Organizations that navigate crises well typically demonstrate:

- Early acknowledgment of the situation
- Patient- and staff-centered communication
- Visible corrective actions
- Leadership presence and accountability

POST-CRISIS REVIEW AND LEARNING

After stabilization, conduct a structured review to evaluate:

- Timeliness and effectiveness of communications
- Stakeholder response and feedback
- Regulatory and legal outcomes
- Opportunities to strengthen future preparedness

Document lessons learned and update crisis plans accordingly.



Crisis Communications Checklist for Leaders

PRE-CRISIS (PREPAREDNESS)

- Crisis communications team identified and documented
- Roles, authority, and escalation thresholds defined
- Spokespeople designated and trained
- High-risk scenarios identified
- Draft response statements prepared
- Contact lists current and accessible

AT CRISIS ONSET

- Activate crisis communications immediately
- Verify known facts and uncertainties
- Align legal, risk, compliance, and communications teams
- Establish single source of truth
- Issue initial internal communication

DURING THE CRISIS

- Provide regular internal updates
- Monitor media and social channels
- Maintain message consistency
- Document decisions and communications
- Adjust messaging as facts evolve

POST-CRISIS

- Conduct after-action review
- Capture lessons learned
- Update crisis plans and training
- Communicate resolution and next steps

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We specialize in managing highly charged issues and work with leadership and legal counsel to discreetly develop and execute strategies that increase positive news coverage, mitigate negative coverage, change prevalent public narratives and/or rebuild reputations.



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