

## **Risk communication is an efficient tool when assessing buildings with suspected indoor climate problems**

Lars-Erik Varg\*, Kjell Andersson and Göran Stridh

Department of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Örebro University Hospital, Sweden

\*Corresponding email: [lars-erik.varg@orebroll.se](mailto:lars-erik.varg@orebroll.se)

*Keywords: Risk communication, Indoor climate, Outrage factors, Risks*

### **Introduction**

Complaints about the indoor environment are frequently made in many non-industrial buildings; notably schools and offices but also in domestic areas. The occupants report symptoms that they relate to the building environment including, for example, insufficient ventilation, temperature problems, or odours. In Sweden, as in many other countries, moulds have been linked to complaints and adverse health effects such as allergic reactions, asthma, and other respiratory complaints. Such situations can flare up if not handled in a proper way, and mass media interference can ensue.

### **Risk Communication**

Risk communication is a means to communicate with the public about risk and differs from traditional risk information in that it involves a reciprocal exchange of information between different actors. The goal with risk communication is to provide relevant information and knowledge, thus, permitting laypersons to make independent decisions about the risks. People perceive risks differently depending on whether the risk is related personally to the individual or family, or is related to the public.

### **Risk Communication and Outrage Factors**

Peter Sandman has formulated an equation for risk communication based on findings in cognitive psychology and risks [1]:

$$\text{risk} = \text{hazard} + \text{outrage}$$

This equation strongly suggests that laypeople's perception of risks is not just a mirror of what scientists are saying. Laypeople also tend to add outrage factors to risk assessments; namely, factors that they want to include in their

judgement of risks. Examples of outrage factors are: whether the risks are voluntary, fairness of how the risks are distributed, trust of actors involved, and degree of control over the risks.

### **Efficient Risk Communication**

More than 15 years experience of risk communication in indoor air problem cases has strengthened our belief that this can play a vital role as to whether a situation may develop into a severe conflict or not. We strongly advocate that a plan for risk communication should be embedded from the beginning in settings where there could be tension between interest groups. In order to promote effective risk communication, we suggest the following six criteria as being of importance:

- Fast and correct information to those concerned
- Meet the needs of mass media
- Transparency, no hidden agenda
- Personal meeting with those most concerned
- Actions planned/taken are presented and discussed
- Those concerned should be involved in the risk communication process

In addition to these basic criteria for effective risk communication, substantial literature is available with more practical advice on what to consider in the actual situations.

We need more knowledge about language-use; how it is perceived and misperceived. To increase the efficiency of risk communication, we also need to explore the concepts of safety and security in more detail.

1. Sandman P.M. 1993. *Responding to Community Outrage: Strategies for Effective Risk Communication*, American Industrial Hygiene Association, Fairfax, Va.