

Building Just-in-Time Lectures during the Prodrome of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

Dear Editor:

Hurricane Katrina, followed by Hurricane Rita, were some of the most destructive and costliest hurricanes in US history. In addition to causing death and destruction, Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma gave rise to an epidemiology of fear.¹ Despite the fact that the odds of dying in a hurricane remains low compared to that of motor vehicle crashes, tornadoes, and fires,²⁻³ the fear of hurricanes was reinforced by disturbing images on television. Often, these images replaced rational thinking. Teachers and public health educators worldwide only had limited materials to educate their students on the risk and risk factors for hurricanes and disasters, demonstrating how poorly the scientific community was prepared to deliver basic scientific facts about hurricanes.

The Global Network Supercourse group decided to change this situation and deliver a basic lecture on the science of hurricanes to an audience of public health professionals and educators. Supercourse is a library consisting of >2,500 lectures on prevention, shared without charge, by >30,000 public health professionals from 151 countries.⁴ Targeting the educator, the Supercourse aims to deliver top quality, low bandwidth lectures to scientists around the globe. To address the problem of the epidemiology of fear associated with disasters, our group, in collaboration with Dr. Ali Ardlan from Teheran, Iran and 30 leading academic meteorologists across the world, developed several scientific lectures dealing with basic facts about hurricanes. Our hurricane lecture (<http://www.pitt.edu/~super1/lecture/lec20371/index.htm>) was unveiled only several days following Hurricane Katrina. This lecture was followed by Hurricane Rita lecture (<http://www.pitt.edu/~super1/lecture/lec21031/index.htm>) and as of 15 December 2005 has received >4,400 hits from around the globe.

Besides building materials, we needed to find the means to deliver the lectures to the educators worldwide. We sent a note to our network of 8,000 academic faculty in the US, asking for help with lecture distribution. Within a few hours after the lectures were unveiled, we were contacted by hundreds of educators who wanted to distribute the lecture throughout the US. Within six days after Rita appeared on the Radar screen in the Gulf of Mexico, and two days prior to Hurricane Rita making landfall, the Global Health Network distributed two scholarly lectures on hurricanes to schools in over 85% of US states.

What is the next step of public health education following the 2005 hurricane season? There is a need to create scientific awareness about the long-term and distant impacts of these disasters so we can help the community to consider and embrace more systemic and long-term solutions for the prevention of the epidemiology of fear. Just in Time (JIT) knowledge is a tool that can be used by public health educators in disaster areas to prioritize and deliver essential, targeted public health information to those who need it most. Interdisciplinary networks of public health professionals, as well as networks of networks, can be powerful in effective dissemination of disaster prevention and mitigation messages. The Supercourse group demonstrated that these methodologies of rapid information development and distribution, potentially can serve as a model for teaching the public on all disaster situations.

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