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As a part of the ASSET project, the European

Institute of Women?s Health were tasked with liaising with local schools to disseminate the activities of the ASSET project. The schools were to have received funding under the Erasmus Plus programme, which is the programme that combines all the EU?s current schemes for education, training, youth and sport in Europe. In Ireland, one school that had received such funding was Tallaght Community School, and together with its staff and students we began a collaboration to teach them more about infectious diseases epidemics and pandemics, and in turn have them teach us about how they view these issues, and how they communicate.

The School

Tallaght Community School is a co-educational secondary school in the suburb of Tallaght, south Dublin. The students we worked with were in Transition Year (TY), which is a year in which students (generally aged 15-16) are assessed, and not examined. The purpose of the TY is to assist in the transition from the school environment by encouraging creativity and responsibility. Students typically receive education in the usual subjects but also participate in work experience, internships, non-academic studies, volunteering, and so on. The idea is that students will encounter subjects and training outside the school environment, get a more practical grounding in various subjects, and try different things before they decide what subjects to study for the two-year Leaving Certificate cycle, which is the final secondary school examination in the Irish school system.

The Information

In discussion with the school principal and the TY coordinator, we developed a presentation and a questionnaire for the students to fill out. Together with the TY coordinator, we made sure that both the presentation and the questionnaire used terminology that the students would be familiar with, and had been exposed to previously.

The presentation was centred around the issue of pandemics and epidemics ? what is it, what causes them, what is the biological mechanisms behind infectious diseases. We then followed up with examples of this, beginning with the Spanish flu, smallpox, polio and cholera to give them an idea of the many different types of pandemics that have existed within history.

We then moved on to more recent epidemics: Zika, SARS, Ebola, and H1N1. Following this, we considered how an illness such as flu spreads in the community, and discussed ways that it might be prevented. We then asked the students what, in their opinion, would be the best way to communicate all this information, specifically pandemic preparedness and prevention of infectious diseases, to teenagers such as them. After this open discussion, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire.

The questionnaire opened with asking the students how familiar they are with epidemics/pandemics in general, and a number of specific diseases. Also, there were questions on information they thought was important to know, and how they could protect themselves from infectious diseases.

The second part of the questionnaire was concerned mainly with how the students get information on health-related issues, how they communicate, what communication channels they trust and why, and what the best communication channels are and which ones they would prefer authorities to use.

The Students

A total of 36 students were involved in the project; 44% (n=16) were female, 53% (n=19) were male, and 1% (n=1) identified as other. The space to write in gender was left blank on purpose, so students could fill in their preferred gender rather than using the traditional binary gender classification of ticking the male or female box. This was not mentioned in the sessions, however one

student chose to write simply ?other? rather than male or female. A majority of the students were 16 years (n=27); 8 students were 15 years old, and 1 student was 17 years old.

The Results

In terms of their knowledge of infectious diseases, pandemics and epidemics, the students presented a mixed picture. They were overall fairly familiar with epidemics/pandemics, especially more recent ones (especially Ebola). However, the fact that influenza was the disease they knew least about may indicate that for these students, a pandemic/epidemic is something on a large scale with catastrophic outcomes, or something that happened in the past ? a ?simple? illness like the flu was not something they know of as a pandemic or epidemic.

The students were aware of everyday aspects of pandemic preparedness. They had many suggestions about how to keep healthy during a pandemic, chiefly to wash your hands, maintain good hygiene and stay informed. Also, when asked what was the most important thing to know during a pandemic/epidemic, the student?s first choice was what to do, followed by routes of transmission. This shows that they were interested in the practical ways in which their behaviour could prevent infection, rather than for example the number of cases and deaths, which was chosen as the least important thing to know.

An overwhelming number of students stated that their chief mode of communication was social media and the internet. It was the communication channel they used the most, the one they would prefer public health authorities to use during a pandemic/epidemic, and the one they would use to get information regarding pandemics and epidemics. In terms of the type of social media used, Facebook was the most popular one, followed closely by Snapchat. Interestingly, only 2 students said they use Twitter the most.

Despite their reliance on social media and the

Internet for essentially every aspect of their communications and (sometimes accidental) news consumption, the students nevertheless seemed to recognise that these channels are not always trustworthy. They stated that ?the news? was the communication channel they trusted the most, followed by radio and the Internet coming in on third place. This particular question threw up a wide array of answers, showing that trust in a communication channel is more complex that it might seem at first for this age group.

Following their patterns of communication, the students said they would prefer the government to use social media as their main communication channel during a pandemic. Yet, they chose ?clear one-way communication from public health authorities? as the best way to provide information during a pandemic/epidemic, and dialogue through platforms such as social media as the third and final option. This may be indicative of the fact that despite the students relying on social media for all forms of communication, they still want clear, non-equivocal information when a serious public health situation occurs. The ?one-way? nature of the communication from public health authorities is preferable to a dialogue, even if this dialogue were to be held on social media.

The Outcome

The students of Tallaght Community School engaged fully with this dissemination activity, and had plenty of opinions, questions and ideas. The method of first introducing the issue though an interactive presentation engaging the students with the topic, followed by an open discussion and then a questionnaire worked very well. It was an excellent opportunity to learn more about their knowledge of the topic, and to engage with this age group at a stage in their education where they are beginning to learn more in-depth about topics which they may go on to study at a higher level.

The insight they provided into their channels of communication and how they interact with

information was absorbing and perceptive, and laid bare some of the challenges any public health body will face in engaging with this age group. This is a generation that has come of age with the internet and social media as a normal and central part of their lives, and this drastic change in how information is consumed, processed and trusted is imperative in order to understand how to communicate with them. Reaching this age group in a pandemic/epidemic will most likely prove challenging without the right preparation and understanding of how they consume information ? however, while only presenting a snapshot, the activities of T7.8 has held us to at least get an insight into these challenges, and how they can be overcome.

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