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Crisis Communication Learned Through the MERS Situation

## Monitor • Ensure • Recover • Sympathize

The Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), a name very few Koreans knew until a month ago, is now at the center of Korea's concern. MERS has affected not only patients, persons under quarantine, the government, and hospitals, but also the society, businesses, and daily lives of ordinary citizens of the entire country. Living in such a hyper-connected society all the more drives home the realization of Korea's vulnerability to sudden crises.

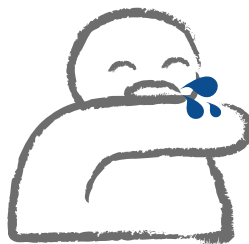
As the saying goes, "Never let a good crisis go to waste." A crisis is a critical opportunity to rectify the past and prevent future disasters. Though decisions made during times of emergency greatly depend on numerous variables, having a basic communication guideline ready aforesite can enable more effective communication.

With all this in mind, FleishmanHillard reviewed the MERS timeline of events and overall public opinion, while paying special attention to what factors ignited further public discussions. Furthermore, we compiled a number of foreign cases we can learn from and summarized important communication elements as 'MERS' (Monitor, Ensure, Recover, Sympathize) in order to overcome the MERS crisis together.

In all, I sincerely hope that the current MERS situation can become a learning opportunity for Korea to further develop its crisis response expertise.

FleishmanHillard Korea

Yvonne Park, Managing Director



**STOP MERS  
TOGETHER!**



## MERS Timeline of Key Events in Korea and Statements that Sparked Public Conversation

Time frame: May 20~June 16, 2015

Date	Situation and Key Events	Statements
5/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>First and second MERS patients confirmed</li> </ul>	<p><b>“Avoid close contact with camels. Do not consume raw camel milk or uncooked camel meat.”</b> - Ministry of Health and Welfare (MH), precautionary notice</p>
5/27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MERS virus infection spreads among medical staff</li> </ul>	<p><b>“We apologize to the Korean public for the MERS outbreak.”</b> - MH Minister Moon Hyungpyo, announcement for strong measures (KBS)</p>
5/28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suspected MERS patient leaves country</li> <li>Unconfirmed rumors spread on social media and mobile messenger platforms</li> </ul>	<p><b>“The government’s disease management system is in catastrophe.”</b> - Korean Medical Association (KMA), calling for close cooperation system (KBS)</p>
5/29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suspected MERS patient that traveled to China confirmed to have the virus</li> </ul>	
5/30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MERS hotline service begins</li> </ul>	<p><b>“We will handle the situation more vigorously by setting up a tighter quarantine system.”</b> - MH Minister Moon, countermeasure meeting (YTN)</p>
6/01	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>18 patients confirmed, 682 quarantined</li> <li>1 suspected patient confirmed to have died of MERS</li> </ul> <p><i>* Rise of negative opinion</i></p>	<p><b>“If the MERS tests read negative, the hospital must take responsibility.”</b> - Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) reluctant and delayed response to test patient zero for MERS (YTN)</p>
6/02	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 confirmed patient dead</li> <li>90 kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high schools close</li> </ul> <p><i>* Negative sentiments skyrocket</i></p> <p><i>* Meanwhile, positive sentiment formed through response strategy that unified sympathy</i></p>	<p><b>“[The government] missed the ‘Golden Time’ again.”</b> - Former party leader, Park Young-sun, New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD) (Twitter @Park_Youngsun)</p>
6/03	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>540 schools close nationwide</li> <li>1,300 quarantined</li> </ul>	<p><b>“Strong action against spreading of false MERS rumors”</b> - National Police Agency Commissioner General Kang Shin-myung on SNS rumors (News1)</p>
6/04	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>35 patients confirmed, 1,600 quarantined</li> <li>1,000 schools close nationwide</li> <li>Negligence of 1 confirmed patient stirs controversy</li> </ul>	<p><b>“Whom should the citizens trust if the CDC has closed its communication channels with the public?”</b> - Criticism of CDC for closing its Twitter platform for ‘content update’ (SBS Blog)</p>
6/05	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>42 patients confirmed, 4 dead</li> <li>1 confirmed patient becomes the first to be cured <i>* Negative sentiment declines</i></li> <li>Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon opens emergency briefing to disclose MERS-confirmed doctor’s points of contact and begin suspected patients’ quarantine</li> <li>Inspection of Pyeongtaek St. Mary’s Hospital visitors</li> <li>1 patient confirmed in Jeonbuk, an entire town placed under quarantine</li> </ul>	<p><b>“ Saudis have much experience fighting MERS. If Korea communicates its situation with us, we will be more than happy to share our experience.”</b> - Saudi Arabia Deputy Minister of Public Health Dr. Abdul Aziz bin Saeed (Yonhap News)</p> <p><b>“MERS can be contracted only inside hospitals. Mechanical ventilation treatments like airway intubation can cause the virus to aerosolize and infect those close by.”</b> - Nature Journal on the unlikeliness of Korea’s MERS situation escalating into an epidemic (Yonhap News)</p>

- **6/06**
  - *\* Negative sentiment noticeably decreases*
  - No genetic mutations found in MERS virus
  - 51 patients confirmed, third-phase endemic spreads
  - Ministry of Public Safety and Security (MPSS) sends out precautionary measures through text message
- **6/07**
  - 65 patients confirmed
  - 1,300 kindergartens and schools in 7 Seoul Gangnam and Gyeonggi regions closed
  - 2 hospitals close 2 emergency rooms
  - Government discloses list of 24 hospitals where confirmed patients found and visited
- **6/08**
  - World Health Organization (WHO) team of experts visit Korea to analyze the MERS virus
  - First teen patient confirmed with MERS
  - 5 additional hospitals disclosed
- **6/09**
  - 95 patients confirmed, 2,800 quarantined
  - First pregnant patient confirmed with MERS *\* Negative sentiment rises again*
  - 5 additional hospitals where confirmed patients found and visited disclosed
  - Nationwide inspection of 40,000 hospitalized pneumonia patients
- **6/10**
  - 108 patients confirmed, 9 dead, 3,400 quarantined
  - Emergency living expenses provided for confirmed patients and quarantined persons
  - President Park delays visit to the U.S.
  - MERS website ([www.mers.go.kr](http://www.mers.go.kr)) opened
  - Tracking system established to trace persons exposed to MERS
  - WHO recommends reopening of schools
- **6/11**
  - 1 Pyeongtaek police officer confirmed with MERS, rising fear of the virus spreading in local communities
  - 122 patients confirmed, 10 dead
  - 3 additional hospitals restricted access
  - Hotline number changed to '109'
- **6/12**
  - First child patient (7 years old) confirmed with MERS
  - Schools reopen in the Gangnam area
  - 1 teacher found to have taught classes before being confirmed with MERS, all students inspected
  - MH provides a list of 87 "safe hospitals"
  - Hotline service for foreigners begin
- **6/13**
  - Experimental plasma therapy conducted on 2 MERS patients
  - 1 Samsung Medical Center patient transport personnel confirmed with MERS
  - Korean and WHO experts announce results at a briefing
- **6/14**
  - Samsung Medical Center closes down parts of the hospital and 1 doctor is confirmed with MERS
- **6/16**
  - 154 patients confirmed, 19 dead, 5,216 quarantined, 5,897 suspected patients, 17 cured

**"Although bringing home the virus is worthy of blame, the way the hospitals and health authorities have responded is no less outdated than what we saw in the 1960s."**

- Wife of first MERS patient in Korea apologizes to Koreans after being cured (Dong-A Ilbo)

**"That may slash Korea's annual GDP by 0.8%P."**

- Morgan Stanley economist Sharon Lam on Korea's economic loss if the MERS situation persists past one month (Business Insider)

**"Korea is at war with MERS and public fear."**

- CNN, University of Iowa Professor Stanley Perlman, "Fatality rates in Korea is projected to be less than 10%" (NEWSis)

**"We will stand by our patients until the end."**

- Samsung Medical Center nurse, uploads a picture of a hand-written message on the hospital's bulletin board which quickly goes viral on social media

**"It is the Korean nation, not the Samsung Medical Center, that has been penetrated by MERS."**

- Samsung Medical Center Dr. Chung Doo-ryeon, on responding to lawmakers' criticism on the hospital's failure to control the 'superspreader' at the National Assembly parliamentary hearing

**"It is doctors, not news reporters, who should pronounce a person dead."**

- Current affairs and politics power blogger 'iampeter', criticizing The Hankook-ilbo and YTN's misreport of a Samsung Medical Center doctor's death on June 11 with no fact-checking with MH

**"The Korean government's control measures are having an impact on MERS."**

- WHO Assistant Director Keiji Fukuda, press conference on MERS (Yonhap News)

**"When you return to China, let people know that it is safe to visit Korea. Please visit Korea more often."**

- President Park to a Chinese tourist at Dongdaemun (Dong-A Ilbo)

## STOP MERS TOGETHER! Crisis Management Communication Guide

Monitor • Ensure • Recover • Sympathize

### Monitor

In the event of a public health crisis, **extensive and thorough monitoring** of the situation takes priority. Media coverage and inquires, conversations on social media, public opinions on hotlines should all be monitored real-time along with the spread of disease. Information that can relieve the public’s fears and concerns should be delivered concisely and accurately in timely manner.

In 2012, Saudi Arabia first faced its challenges in MERS outbreak, but the Command & Control Center (CCC) under the Ministry of Health established itself as the main control tower by 2014 and arranged all crisis management communication, eventually turning the situation around to be in control dealing with the epidemic. During the time, FleishmanHillard teams worked on the ground, offering communication consulting for crisis management, and proved the importance of news and social media monitoring through this experience. Real-time monitoring was made possible through a daily media and social media monitoring dash board which captured matters of issues frequently mentioned. By monitoring social media channels, experts were able to grasp citizens’ expectations of public health authorities and the government and be alerted to potential issues before they became false crises. Monitoring of all channels including traditional and social media offered critical help in deciding effective channels and messages for precisely targeted communication.

In any crisis situation, tight monitoring opens ways for communication leaders to seek analytical insight and opportunities to turn a situation around **“by instinct.”**

 **Monitoring Checklist**

- Discussion of MERS, frequency of mention, and extent of diffusion
- Frequency of MERS and control authorities’ (health, government) simultaneous mention and extent of diffusion
- Key reports on MERS and control authorities
- Key news reports / social driver
- Key reports by foreign news media

[ CCC daily monitoring dash board key checklist ]

Saudi YouTube

 **78% of Saudi adults** are active on YouTube



**KSA ranks #1** worldwide for YouTube activity



**90M** views daily



Users watch **7 videos** per day (avg)



How to prevent Coronavirus طرق الوقاية من فيروس كورونا

3,007,811 views

1,107 likes

9/23/2014, 8:4

المركز الوطني للأمن وإدارة الأزمات  
http://www.moh.gov.sa/accorona/

[ CCC YouTube video with more than 3 million views ]

## Ensure

In order to stop MERS as soon as possible, it is vital that ordinary citizens as well as governmental, medical, corporate, and academic leaders take the lead in communicating the importance of following regulations and guidelines.

When an epidemic breaks out, for quick and precise landscape surveys, it is necessary to have a **simple diagnosis system (checklist, response plan, etc.) that concerned parties, including patients, doctors, public health authorities, central and local governments, can easily use and follow.** It is essential to establish a system that helps each party to efficiently perform its own roles. Also, encouraging communication can help stop the issue from spreading and stabilize public sentiments.

Short-term communication needs to be focused on following the checklist or manual to prevent the virus from spreading. Long-term communication efforts should include campaigns for improving public etiquettes like washing hands, covering the mouth when sneezing, as well as more sanitary patient visiting practices.

In addition, in order to raise public's trust during a crisis, an **official 'One-Voice' principle** is crucial. It is important that all internal staffs, related organizations and personnel follow a high level of security while only delivering information through official channels. Expertise expressed in this 'One-Voice' approach will add authority, leading it to earn the media's trust and calm public anxiety.

The United States' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), held a remote press briefing ([Link](#)) on May 2, 2014, when the first MERS positive patient in the US was confirmed. The briefing was hosted by CDC spokesperson Tom Skinner and the main discussion was led by Anne Schuchat, the director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Disease at CDC. At the briefing, Ms. Schuchat disclosed the MERS patient's points of contact, stages of infection, and took follow-up questions from the media. Through this, CDC became the central channel providing reliable information about MERS through its experts, immediately following the nation's first MERS case.

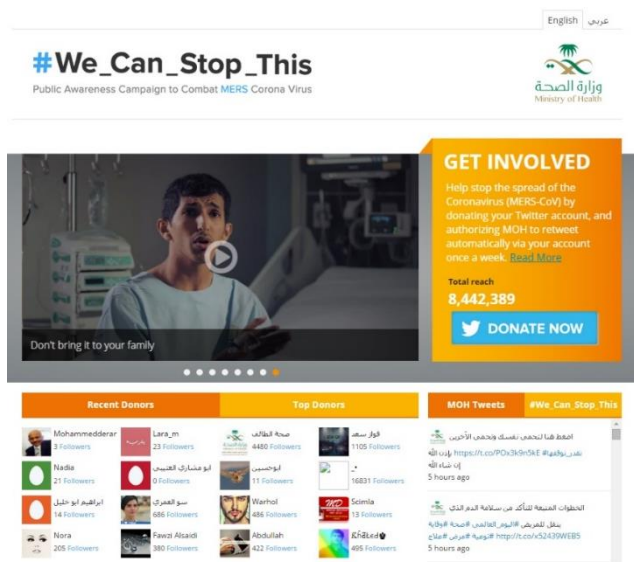


The screenshot shows the CDC Newsroom website. The main heading is "CDC Transcript: First case of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus infection (MERS) in the United States". Below the heading are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, and a plus sign for more options. A section titled "Press Briefing Transcript" indicates the date "May 2, 2014 at 3:00 PM ET" and provides a link to an audio recording (MP3, 7.61 MB). The transcript text begins with an operator's welcome and then a transcript of Tom Skinner's opening remarks. The transcript text is partially visible and includes the following content:

**OPERATOR:** Welcome and thank you all for holding. I would like to remind all parties that your lines are on a listen-only mode until the question and answered segment of today's conference. This call is being recorded. If you have any objections, please disconnect at this time. I will now turn it over to Tom Skinner for opening remarks.

**TOM SKINNER:** Thank you all for joining us as we discuss the first case of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus infection (MERS) in the United States. Today we have with us, Anne Schuchat, who is the director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases here at CDC. She will provide some opening remarks and then when we get to your questions, she's going to be joined by Ms. Pamela Portones, who is the state epidemiologist for the Indiana State Department of Health. Now I would like to turn the call over to Dr. Anne Schuchat.

Saudi Arabia’s Command & Control Center (CCC) under its Ministry of Health is connecting MERS-related Twitter accounts and conducting an account donation campaign in order to raise awareness on MERS prevention. Based on these integrated channels, the CCC delivers consistent messages and it is receiving generally positive responses from the public.



[ CCC Twitter account donation campaign ]



[ Official Twitter account of Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Health with more than 700,000 followers ]

The media plays crucial roles in spreading or resolving crisis situations. Many news outlets in Korea have recently devised MERS reporting guidelines to follow. Through this action, we are reminded of the special responsibility the media has to take upon themselves, **the responsibility to set up ethics and principles relevant to public emergencies.**

Mark Senak, healthcare communication expert at FleishmanHillard in Washington D.C., said in a blog post ([Link](#)) on communication strategies regarding emerging pathogens like MERS, “A great public service would be to provide a writer’s guide for journalists on emerging pathogens.” A writer’s guide that has been refined by public health professionals will empower journalists in producing accurate reports in times of little or no information on new diseases. Also, it may provide insights into high-standard reporting practices from a public health perspective.

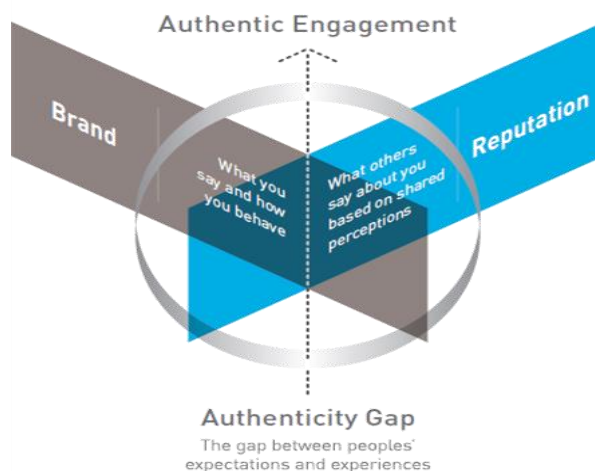


## Recover

In times of crises, one thing that requires special attention is an organization's reputation. One of the most effective times to start a reputation recovery program is the moment the crisis situation comes to an end.

At that moment, lessons learned from the crisis must be organized coherently. The lessons must then be shared and the best possible response measures for similar crises must be established. The current MERS situation has to be also handled this way.

**Meaningful implications and response strategies learned from the MERS crisis must be promptly organized and shared with the international community.** Such **active cooperation** is a duty and a virtue expected of a medically advanced country. Korea should not only be seen as a country with exemplary medical staffs and systems, but be regarded as a country working to contribute in developing global public health. To achieve such reputation, proactive actions are needed.



[ FleishmanHillard Brand and Reputation Management Model: Authenticity Gap ]

FleishmanHillard believes that the 'Authenticity Gap,' the gap between expectations and experiences, must be narrowed for a better reputation. Likewise, in order to minimize reputational damage caused by MERS, it is vital that the gap between the world's expectations of the Korean medical system and its actual experiences be reduced.

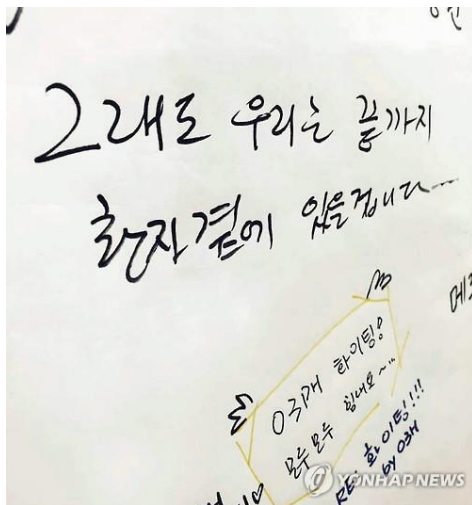


## Sympathize

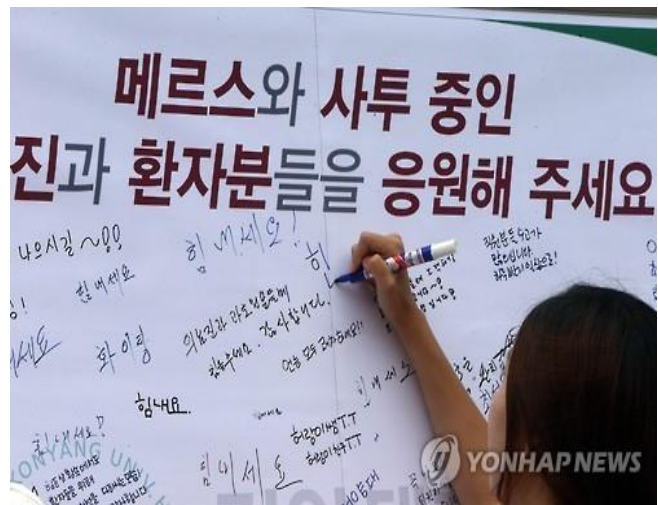
In the case of a public health crisis, authorities must first sympathize with the public's fears before trying to dispel unnecessary fear and anxiety. People are prone to be concerned about health issues even when they are statistically proven to be safe. In crisis, **understanding and sympathizing with the public's fears** must be done rather than identifying those to blame. The CCC crisis management manual of Saudi Arabia strongly advises against playing the 'blame game' and emphasizes the need to show sincerity and serious concerns towards grave situations.

Additionally, **patients and medical staff members who are battling the crisis on the front lines must be comforted and encouraged.** It is also important to show **consideration towards reporters** who cover these stories regardless of their fears. Such measures can subdue heightened fears and concerns to ultimately minimize possible harm. If the government, authorities, companies, organizations, and citizens can all work together to support and cheer on the medical staff and health authorities that are leading the battle, the experience will become a greater asset for our society. Now is the time that sincere communication founded on sympathy and consideration, is desperately needed throughout the society.

### STOP MERS TOGETHER!



[ Samsung Medical Center bulletin board in the nurse's cafeteria, Yonhap News Agency, June 10 ]



[ Konyang University Hospital, Yonhap News Agency, June 11 ]

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