

Public Health Expert Explains How to Prevent a Panic About Ebola: Tell the Truth

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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The head of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota – Dr. Michael Osterholm – is one of the world’s top infectious disease experts and a prominent public health scientist.

Dr. Osterholm just gave a talk shown on C-Span, explaining how to prevent the public from panicking about Ebola:

I categorically reject the idea that you can’t tell people you “don’t know” ... because you’re afraid you’ll scare them.

There is a complete [scientific] literature on risk communications that says people are never frightened if you tell them you don’t know, but “this is what I’m doing to learn”. Or [if you tell them] “this is something, and it might be very scary.”

The literature shows – over and over again – there are 2 things that will turn them to be very concerned ... if not scared.

One is if you tell them with certainty “A”, and then you tell them with certainty “B”, and then A and B don’t happen ... or they happen in a way you didn’t tell them. Then they wonder about your credibility.

The second thing is if you get dueling banjos. If you get one person saying A, and another person saying “oh, you’re going to scare people, don’t say that” ... because it’s not true. The literature supports that’s when people get concerned.

One of the worst enemies we can have today is dogma. Dogma should be, at the first instance, the thing we jettison immediately. Do not fall into the trap of dogma. I see far too many today doing that for the fact that they want to reassure the public about A,B or C ... and that is a dangerous path.

And [see this](#).

Dr. Osterholm gives an example: the medical community is trying to downplay the fact that some people with Ebola *never* have a fever ... right up until the time they die. The failure to talk openly about this fact will only end up shaking people’s confidence:

(And temperature screening is [easily fooled](#), even when an Ebola carrier does have a fever.)

One of our recurring themes is that [happy talk](#) *doesn't* fix anything.

Giving [false assurances](#) only [backfires](#) ... instead making people [lose trust in their governments and institutions](#), and *increasing* their fear.

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