
PANEL II DISCUSSION: SESSION III PUBLIC INFORMATION NEEDS*

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MR. FRIENDLY: Are we any better off with the flow of information than we were four years ago?

MR. JOHN COMEY (Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency): I do believe we are. We can look to the Three Mile Island experience as the classic bad example and, in accepting it as a learning experience, proceed. We have done this in the last four years. There were many reasons why an organization, a response mechanism at a governmental level, did not function anywhere near the capacity of which it was capable under the most difficult of circumstances.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had a five-mile response mechanism for an accident at that nuclear facility. Two days later it was mentioned by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission that it should be 10 miles. Before the end of the day that was expanded to 20. What we are talking about is 20,000 people versus 750,000 people. The awesomeness of this task of expanding was a challenge that we had never confronted.

We have learned much since then. The areas of responsibility have been separated. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania will not speak for conditions on site at the nuclear facility. The utility operates the facility and is licensed to do so. Our position is that the utility and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, therefore, are the technical and proper spokesmen to explain conditions on site and what is happening inside that containment.

At the same time, the governor, county commissioners, and municipal officials were elected to office, and part of their responsibility is to provide for public protection. On their shoulders rests the responsibility for ensuring the protection of those who could be affected by this facility. We have a standing agreement with our nuclear facility locations that

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those operators will not talk about offsite protective actions. The utility will make no reference to offsite conditions.

The utility reviews the facts as they see them and makes a recommendation on protective action to the governor. This is not made public. The governor must also weigh the opinions of the other departments and bureaus involved. For example, the Department of Transportation reports on the current road conditions, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency reports on the necessity for protective actions, et cetera. The governor will then make his decision.

Our Department of Environmental Resources maintains a division of nuclear experts, including a nuclear engineer, who go to the facility to monitor and to assess conditions at the plant. This information is communicated to Harrisburg and included in the overall situation analysis. We used Three Mile Island as a good example of what not to do. We have substantially improved our staff of technical experts, as well as the equipment that they use to support their assessments. Our ability to respond at every level of government has improved. Plans and procedures are in place and are frequently exercised to train those involved as well as test our effectiveness.

MR. FRIENDLY: I would like to ask Ms. Lester, since she has experienced the opposite situation, to put herself in the position of a public information speaker for a utility. A crisis has occurred at a plant and a reporter is on the phone who has five minutes to his deadline. He wants a statement, but the lawyer for the utility has said to keep quiet for fear of liability suits in the future. What do you do?

MS. LESTER: The only thing to do is tell the truth. The question then becomes, "how much of the truth do you want to release?" The problem at Three Mile Island was that the utility neglected to tell the truth by down-playing the importance of the accident, therefore causing a crisis of confidence in the eyes of the public. The classic rule of public information is not to talk outside one's area of knowledge. During Three Mile Island, spokesmen for the utility, state, and federal authorities were forced to comment on events about which they had no first-hand information. They were under the same or greater pressures as those of us on the other end who were asking the questions.

MR. DIAMOND: It turns out that there is no such thing as a cover-up any more. It eventually comes out. That attorney has to understand that he has to either tell the bad news as it occurs, or he ends up telling the bad news later, when it is often seen as a cover-up.

MR. FRIENDLY: If tomorrow Ms. Lester or Mr. Diamond were riding in their automobiles and heard on the radio that there was a problem at a plant, what should be the first phone call that they make?

MR. COMEY: I would say they should call either the Commonwealth or my office. We are staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

DR. EISENBUD: I think that he should proceed either to the site of the emergency or to his office.

MR. FRIENDLY: How close to the emergency site do you think the police are going to let them get?

DR. EISENBUD: I would assume that, having learned the mistakes of Three Mile Island accident, that, if there is a next time, there will be an information headquarters established at a central and accessible location.

MR. DIAMOND: I think the first thing to do is call the utility. The second thing to do is call my office.

MR. FRIENDLY: If something terrible has happened, do you think the utility people will tell you? I ask this out of ignorance.

MR. DIAMOND: I can only speak for the utility which I cover. I can say that because of the people I know and the relationship that I have with them they would tell me what they knew. I also think that if they had been instructed not to tell me something, that they would tell me that also, perhaps.

MR. FRIENDLY: How much information do you think they are going to get when they call up the utility company, the governor's office, or the Nuclear Regulatory Commission?

MS. LESTER: A lot more than you would have four years ago. I think that great strides have been made in this area. Should a Three Mile Island type accident occur today, more public information would be available, certainly within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. It has been said that if another nuclear accident were to occur, the operator of Three Mile Island would be the best utility to handle it from a public information standpoint.

After the accident there have been other episodes in which the utility has demonstrated not only its understanding of the need to provide public information, but its willingness to do so. A classic case in point was during the krypton venting, roughly a year after the accident. The venting was necessary to relieve pressure that had been developing within the crippled containment building. Although the venting was a controlled, limited release over a two-week span, it raised many of the same concerns voiced during the accident by the public, i.e., "Is this radiation going to

be harmful?." An independent analysis by the Union of Concerned Scientists indicated that the overall impact of the krypton venting would be minimal, as the noble gases would readily disperse into the atmosphere. The utility set up a 24-hour hot line for public information which people could call to learn the status of the venting. A similar hot line was established at the state level for rumor control.

As a reporter who covered the krypton venting, I saw tremendous improvement in how the utility handled public information from only one year earlier. Regular press conferences and radiation readings were announced and conducted to keep the media and the public informed.

MR. FRIENDLY: Mr. Comey, how about the rest of the country? Prepared?

MR. COMEY: I think it varies from state to state and how seriously elected officials take the potential problem of any emergency affecting the people, including nuclear power. I would say the scale is 1 to 10. New York State, because of problems in the past, certainly is doing an outstanding job. The procedures are very similar in New York and in Pennsylvania.

MR. FRIENDLY: How well prepared are the family doctors in Pennsylvania?

MR. COMEY: I cannot speak for the doctors themselves, but health care facilities surrounding nuclear facilities have learned much.

SPEAKER: I want to know why the media focused on crisis issues that sell copies and has failed to conduct continuing in-depth discussions both pro and con nuclear energy. They seem to lump nuclear energy, nuclear power plants, and nuclear bombs all in one package. They have not given the pronuclear power people the same type of coverage the antinuclear power people have had.

MR. DIAMOND: One reason is that reporters do write about nuclear power plant problems solely because of what sells. I have here a reader survey of the United States by the Gannett newspapers, the largest newspaper chain in the country. It asks what do readers want to read? Number 1 is national disasters and tragedies, by far the most significant news stories that people read first. Number 2 is news of the economy; 3 is national politics; 4 is food. And it goes on. Medical science, is, I think, 21, science technology is 29, just above welfare.

However, there are two issues here, and both must be dealt with. A national disaster or a tragedy will be page one news. We write stories, in significant part, for what people want to read. It is both a problem and a

reflection of reality. The other important issue is that this is a mutual problem with both newspapers and with the people we interview to explain medical science and technology accurately in our articles. Understanding and effort on the part of the media are increasing, some better and some worse than others, to resolve these two issues. This is a two-way street, and I have found the kind of attitudes expressed by various individuals today to be counterproductive to the kind of communication that is really needed.

DR. EISENBUD: Immediately after the Three Mile Island accident, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and other federal agencies conducted independent investigations of what was learned as a result of the accident. The utility industry also conducted several investigations; their findings, like the findings that resulted from the governmental investigations, are a matter of public record. I would like to know whether the media industry has conducted a similar investigation, and what they found as a result of its appraisal of the role it played?

MR. FRIENDLY: The answer is that the press is very nervous about what it did then. It is full of self-examination. If you would read the journalism reviews and some criticism on the air and in the newspapers, you will find all kinds of introspection and searching for answers. That is one of the reasons that some of us are here today.

MR. JOSEPH A. WALZ (General Dynamics Corporation): I would like to ask why people who presumably worked at Three Mile Island were interviewed on television when they did not know what they were talking about?

MR. FRIENDLY: When you do not create a stream of well organized information and lack a proper forum for questions and answers, you force the 200 first warm bodies at the scene to go searching for targets.

There is much discussion about the safety aspects of nuclear power plants but not much about nuclear submarines. Why is that?

MR. WALZ: I think the whole naval nuclear program is at a higher level of control and care.

MR. DIAMOND: I think the answer is Hyman Rickover and his managerial style. I have looked into nuclear plants for two years, and I found something very interesting. I tried to compare the managements of various nuclear power plants one to the other, and some are more effective. One interesting example came up. One of the best operated nuclear power plants in the country is at Haddam Neck in Connecticut. The company who runs it, Yankee Atomic Electric, is quite good. I found that the

person who helped organize the company had been one of Rickover's lieutenants. He came to that company and organized the discipline that showed in all the operations. I then tried to find the next best operated nuclear plant in the country, and I found one of the Wisconsin Electric power plants which the same man had organized.

DR. JOHN MATUSZEK (New York State Department of Health): Referring back to the previous discussion, the New York State Department of Health and the county Commissioner of Health have staff members who are competent and capable of answering questions. They have as much up-to-date information as possible. There is a complete phone communications network, called the hotline, from each power plant to a center in Albany, operated by the Office of Disaster Preparedness 24 hours a day. When something happens, that call is an immediate call placement required by the regulatory agency.

Now, admittedly, the information flow has its delays, many times because the engineers in the control room do not know what is going on, and it may not be possible to tell exactly what is happening at that moment. However, there is a difference between having access to knowledgeable and reasonably up to date information as opposed to each caller having to know what is going on at the very second of the call.

MR. ANDREW P. HULL (Brookhaven National Laboratory): I want to put you on the spot a little by asking you a question that is partly laboratory, and partly real. I shall not speak for all the scientists and others who know about nuclear reactor technical features who are in this room, but I think that most of them would agree that in what is called emergency planning we are not really aiming at saving lives. We think the possibility of an accident in which life saving is going to be a factor in whatever we do is so remote it is not worth considering. We do believe that what we are planning for is what we call dose reduction, or ALARA (as low as reasonably achievable). There is no point in getting any unnecessary radiation exposure because it may be bad for you.

Yet the public has that psychology that, given an accident in which an "emergency" is declared and a warning is issued, their very lives are imperiled. We do not equate protective actions for dose reduction with that kind of an "emergency." How do we convey this notion, as scientists and experts, so the public can perceive it without misconception? Most people think that if we are going to declare an emergency, evacuation is the sole remedy. How do you indicate to the public that they should not just get in their cars and start driving the minute they hear something is

wrong in a nuclear plant? We really think that what an individual should do is to stay put until somebody comes out and makes the measurements.

MR. DIAMOND: The problem is that there is a lot of disagreement among experts about the effects of an accident. So there is no hard answer. The most we can do is the very thing that I keep trying to avoid, which is to try as best we can to point out the uncertainties, and what is not known.

MS. LESTER: A fundamental lesson from Three Mile Island is that there is very much a need for people like yourselves, experts with credentials in your field, to communicate with members of the community and the local media before such a nuclear accident might occur, through an ad hoc emergency information network. We are all human. We have our own perspective, and we are all only as good as humans can be. It is important that we talk to each other before that crisis, should it ever occur again.

As a journalist trying to cover the unprecedented events at Three Mile Island, I know that many of the problems I encountered would have been alleviated if I had known people whom I could call for responsible authoritative comment. Pennsylvania has developed its own emergency communications system. Having this system on line at the time would have helped as well. That is not to say that the communication system will not break down should another accident happen again, but I firmly believe that we would handle it better, report it better, in a more accurate and timely manner, thanks to the interagency cooperative relationships which have been established.

DR. A. AARON YALOW (Cooper Union School of Engineering): I would appreciate a comment from panel members on the effects of bias in the media on their presentation of issues concerning nuclear power and especially with regard to a press conference held by Governor Thornburgh of Pennsylvania on the venting of krypton gases at Three Mile Island.

MR. COMEY: It was a balanced presentation because the people who lived near the facility, the ones with the greatest concern, felt that they wanted to hear all sides of the question from the Pennsylvania Department of Health, the Pennsylvania Bureau of Radiation Protection, other federal agencies, and the Union of Concerned Scientists. The governor did not look to the Union of Concerned Scientists solely.

DR. EISENBUD: The governor asked for two reports. He asked for a report from the Union of Concerned Scientists as well as from the National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements. It so happened that I chaired the committee that was set up for the National

Council on Radiation Protection. A press conference was held in the governor's office at the time the report was delivered. Governor Thornburgh and I both made statements. The Council report was essentially identical with the Union of Concerned Scientists report; except that the latter recommended that because of psychological trauma to the population, they would feel better if the vent was attached to a 1,500 foot hose raised by a blimp. In the press the next day, all that was reported was that the Union of Concerned Scientists had recommended the blimp.

MR. FRIENDLY: You have got a problem, and I have to tell you that in the battle, the tug of war, that goes on between the statistics of complacency and the statistics of doomsday, the latter usually wins. I think that responsible news organizations try to correct for that and try to identify sources and their track records. I think it is very hard for the more prudent scientist to compete with people who are way out there.

I think we have two of the finest journalists in this area here. I think what they will tell you if you get them alone is that the gatekeeper, the person in the slot, the producer who makes up the schedule, and decides what to use, is often manipulated by those scare stories. That is not a defense. That is an indictment of our profession.

MR. JOHN KELLY (Power Authority of the State of New York): I would like to have clarified which source of information on nuclear power is preferred by the media representatives on the panel, off hours access to scientists or a single conduit of news.

MR. DIAMOND: There is no conflict. It is routine journalism versus personal access. During accidents we want access to people. I was talking about day to day, and Miss Lester was speaking about specific incidents of nuclear accidents.