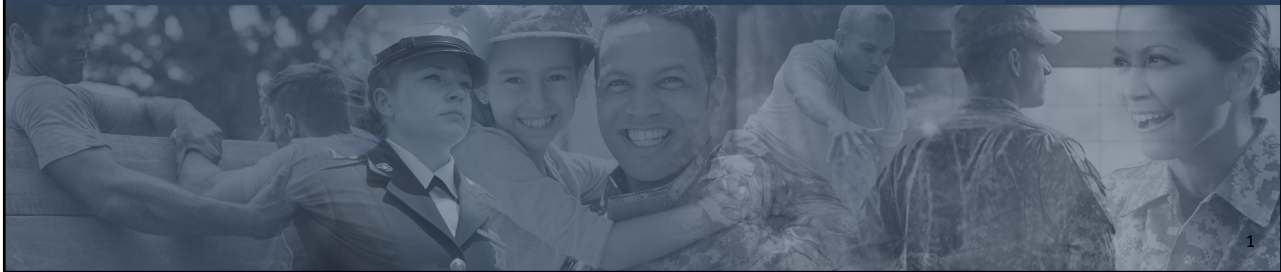# Effective Public Health Communication Strategies with Department of Defense Personnel

Wilsie Bishop, DPA
Chair, Public Health Subcommittee
June 4, 2024

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Overview / Agenda

- Membership
- Tasking
- Objectives and Scope
- Report/ToR Crosswalk
- Guiding Principles

- Report Structure
- Organization of Findings
- Chapters and Findings
- Way Forward
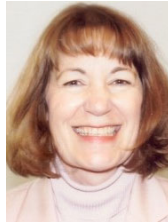- Backup Slides:
  - Subcommittee Activities

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Membership

Georges Benjamin, MD

John Clements, PHD

Marion Ehrich, PhD, MS

CHAIR
Wilsie Bishop DPA, MPA*

Ruth Etzel, MD, PHD

Christopher Johnson, PHD

*Board Member

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Tasking

On May 12, 2023, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs directed the Defense Health Board (DHB) to **provide recommendations on how the DoD could better deliver health information within an environment of misinformation.**

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Objectives and Scope

A. Identify lessons learned about DoD's vulnerabilities and capabilities in disseminating health information during the COVID pandemic.

B. Review DoD/DHA policies and processes used for health communications.

C. Review academic, commercial, and government research on best practices for health communications.

D. Provide recommendations for how the DoD could better deliver health information within an environment of misinformation and threats to credibility.

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Report/ToR Crosswalk

Chapter	ToR Objective A	ToR Objective B	ToR Objective C	ToR Objective D
Introduction	X			
1	X	X		X
2	X	X		X
3	X		X	X
4			X	X

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Guiding Principles

- Time is of the essence. DoD must prepare for the next health emergency now and sustain the infrastructure to ramp up as needed.

- DoD health communication is military-specific but occurs within a complex and influential civilian communication environment. DoD health communication as a discipline must adapt to the current and future information environment.

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Guiding Principles

- Trust is essential to messaging uptake and to successful misinformation and disinformation mitigation efforts. Leadership and trusted messengers play an essential role in creating and sustaining trust.

- Communicators of health information must provide recommendations based on available evidence and facts at the time. They must be clear about what they know and what they don't and be honest about the scope of their expertise.

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Report Structure

Chapter 1:   Frameworks that Guide DoD Health Communication
During a Global or National Health Emergency

Chapter 2:   Routine and Emergency Health Communication in DoD

Chapter 3:   Health Communication in an Infodemic

Chapter 4:   Optimizing Health Communication in DoD
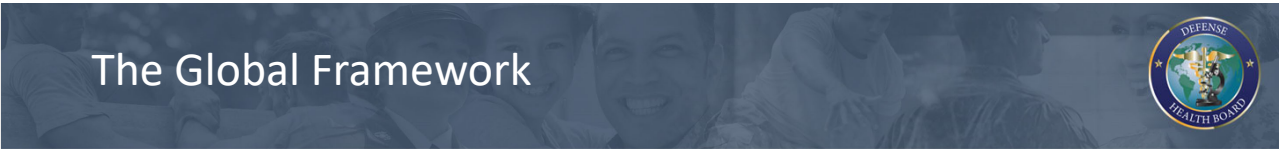
Organization of Findings

- Findings and Recommendations have coalesced into three areas:

  - Organizational
  - Societal and infodemic-related factors that impact the military and beneficiary population
  - Best practices in health communications

Chapter 1

Frameworks that Guide
DoD Health Communication
during a Global or National
Health Emergency

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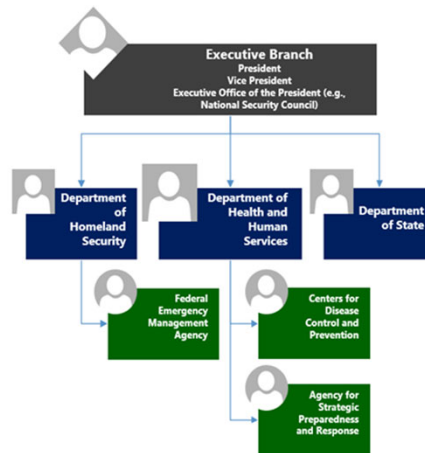11

The Global Framework

https://www.who.int/about/policies/publishing/logo

- International Health Regulations (IHR)

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The National Response Framework

The National Response Framework

- Guide U.S. responses to disasters and emergencies

- Organizes capabilities and resources under 15 Emergency Support Functions

  - Each Emergency Support Function includes the core capability of 'Public Information and Warning.'

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U.S. Department of Homeland Security. National Response Framework. October 2019.

Joint Publication 3-08: Interorganizational Cooperation

Joint Publication 3-08: Interorganizational Cooperation

- Outlines principles, guidance, and strategies for effective cooperation and coordination between U.S. military forces and

  - other governmental organizations
  - non-governmental organizations
  - intergovernmental organizations
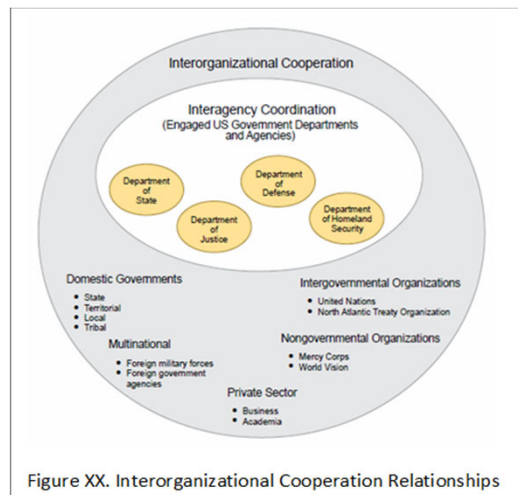 - the private sector

Figure XX. Interorganizational Cooperation Relationships

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Department of Defense. Joint Publication 3-08 Interorganizational Cooperation. October 2017.

Challenges to Interorganizational Communication During the Initial Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic
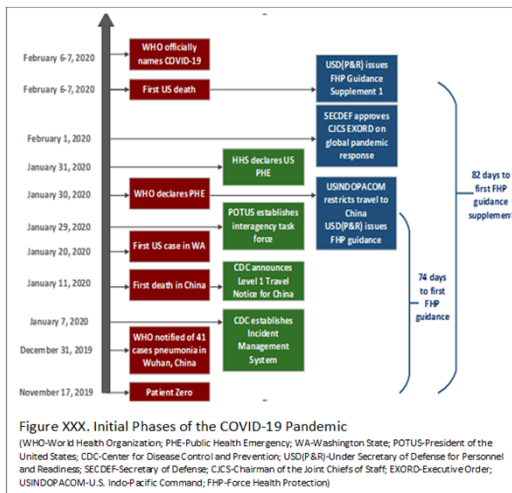

Figure XXX. Initial Phases of the COVID-19 Pandemic
(WHO-World Health Organization; PHE-Public Health Emergency; WA-Washington State; POTUS-President of the United States; CDC-Center for Disease Control and Prevention; USD(P&R)-Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness; SECDEF-Secretary of Defense; CJCS-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; EXORD-Executive Order; USINDOPACOM-U.S. Indo-Pacific Command; FHP-Force Health Protection)

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Information from the U.S. Department of Defense Coronavirus Timeline.

Improvements in Collaboration and Communications for Bioincident Management

- 2023 update to the Biological Incident Annex to the Response and Recovery Federal Interagency Operational Plan

- 2023 Department of Defense Biodefense Posture Review

- WHO Member State Activities:

  - Amendments to International Health Regulations

  - Pandemic Accord

U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Biological Incident Annex to the Response and Recovery Federal Interagency Operational Plan. May 2023.
U.S. Department of Defense Biodefense Posture Review. August 2023.

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Finding 1

DoD communication during an international or national health emergency is impacted by global and national context. Amendments to International Health Regulations, for example, have special importance to the Department of Defense given its global footprint. Additionally, DoD emergency management and associated communications involve multiple branches of government and stakeholders, the interaction of which is difficult to predict.

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Finding 2

Recent and proposed improvements in collaboration and communication about emergency health risk management at the global and national level emphasize intelligence gathering, disease surveillance, and early warning capabilities.

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Finding 3

The Biodefense Posture Review proposes the Biodefense Council as the standing body to facilitate DoD-wide collaboration on biodefense response. However, the Biodefense Council is not currently included in DoD instructions, DoD plans, or federal plans.

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Chapter 2

Routine and Emergency Health Communication in DoD

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Routine and Emergency Health Communication in DoD

Public Affairs and Strategic Communication

Promotes the safety, quality, and reliability of routine MHS health care.

Communication experience

Public Health Emergency Management

HPCON LEVELS — 0, ALPHA, BRAVO, CHARLIE, DELTA

Emergency Management experience

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Public Health Expertise is Essential but not Integrated into Communication Efforts

Public Affairs and Strategic Communication

Promotes the safety, quality, and reliability of routine MHS health care.

Communication experience

Public Health Expertise

Public Health Emergency Management

HPCON LEVELS — 0, ALPHA, BRAVO, CHARLIE, DELTA

Emergency Management experience

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Health Communication in DoD During COVID-19

- A chaotic beginning

- Blurred lines of responsibility

- Need for better coordination

- Delays in official communication allowed space for other messages

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Finding 4

Communication during a health emergency is qualitatively different from other types of health communication and emergency management. Communication challenges during the pandemic suggest that public health and communication science expertise is not sufficiently integrated into current DoD communication channels. During COVID-19, DoD Force Health Protection Guidance was not accompanied by public health communication campaigns. Rather, individuals and units developed their own messages and communication.

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Chapter 3

Health Communication in an Infodemic

The COVID-19 Infodemic

"We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic."

-World Health Organization (WHO)
Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

- Proliferation of misinformation and disinformation
  - Some intentionally directed to Service members to undermine readiness
- Politization of public health and science
- Decline in trust and willingness to take vaccines and adhere to non-medical interventions

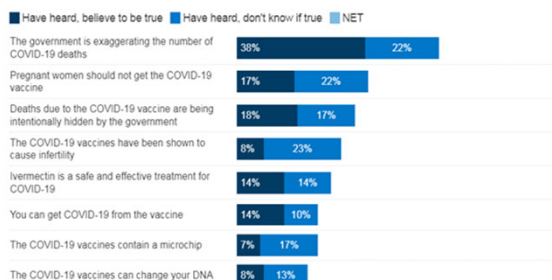## Misinformation and Disinformation: Old Problems on a New Scale

Misinformation and disinformation proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic
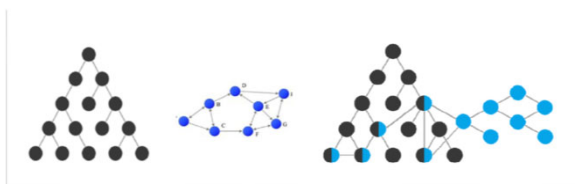
Belief in misinformation about COVID-19 is linked to:

- Reduced compliance with masking and quarantine guidance
- Greater use of poorly evidenced COVID-19 treatments such as ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine
- Harassment, threats, and violence directed towards PH workers

Figure 1

Nearly Eight In Ten Believe Or Are Unsure About At Least One Common Falsehood About COVID-19 Or The Vaccine

Have you heard anyone say or have you read anywhere that...? IF YES: To the best of your knowledge is that true or false, or do you not know whether it is true or false?

Have heard, believe to be true ■ Have heard, don't know if true ■ NET

The government is exaggerating the number of COVID-19 deaths	38%	22%
Pregnant women should not get the COVID-19 vaccine	17%	22%
Deaths due to the COVID-19 vaccine are being intentionally hidden by the government	18%	17%
The COVID-19 vaccines have been shown to cause infertility	8%	23%
Ivermectin is a safe and effective treatment for COVID-19	14%	14%
You can get COVID-19 from the vaccine	14%	10%
The COVID-19 vaccines contain a microchip	7%	17%
The COVID-19 vaccines can change your DNA	8%	13%

Hamel, Lee, Lunna Lopes, Ashley Kirzinger, Grace Sparks, Mellisha Stokes, and Mollyann Brodie. 2021. "KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: Media and Misinformation." Kaiser Family Foundation.

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Features of the Information Environment Shape and Direct Information Consumption

| Hierarchy | Network | Network impacting Hierarchy |

Hierarchies transmit information vertically.

Networks spread information horizontally and impact hierarchical communications.

DoD personnel receive information from outside of the institutional hierarchy – from families, friends, and associates within and outside DoD. Such information may or may not support desired DoD messages.

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Ferguson, N. (2019). *The square and the tower: Networks and power, from the Freemasons to Facebook*. Penguin.

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Features of the Information Environment Shape and Direct Information Consumption

https://online-metrics.com/three-ways-to-segment-data-in-google-analytics/

Social media algorithmically sorts users into "echo chambers" and prioritizes user engagement over accuracy (and civility).

Other contributing factors include:

- News media fragmentation

- Political polarization

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The Information Environment and DoD's Vaccine Mandate

- December 11, 2020
  - FDA grants Emergency Use Authorization for Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine
- August 23, 2021
  - FDA fully approves the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for all people ages 18 years and older
- August 24, 2021
  - DoD issues Coronavirus Disease 2019 requirement for Members of the Armed Forces *after vaccine was fully approved by the FDA
- January 10, 2023
  - DoD rescinds August 24, 2021 (and subsequent November 30, 2021) Coronavirus Disease 2019 vaccination requirement for Members of the Armed Forces, in accordance with 2023 National Defense Authorization Act

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Finding 5

Societal and Infodemic-related

Features of the information environment challenge DoD efforts to communicate health information to beneficiaries. However, media literacy training programs have demonstrated success in improving students' ability to discern accurate information in digital environments.

Chapter 4

Optimizing Health Communication in DoD
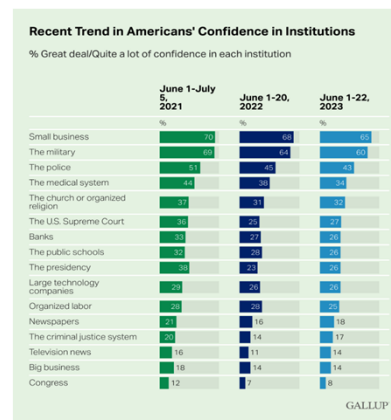
Health Decision Making is Multi-Determined

• Individual health decisions are informed by other considerations including:

  • Trust in the communicating institution and individual

  • Cultural norms and expectations

  • Personal motivations and interests

  • Psychology and emotions

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Trust Impacts How Messages are Received

• Trust in major institutions has declined.

• Trust in the military and in scientists has declined but remains high.

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Saad, Lydia. 2023. "Historically Low Faith in U.S. Institutions Continues. *Gallup*.

Building and Sustaining Public Trust

• Health communication is most effective in an atmosphere of trust.

• Institutional trust is extremely important. Words and deeds must align. Each member of the organization has a role in promoting trust.

• Rebuilding lost trust is possible but challenging. A concerted effort to address the sources of distrust is required.

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Building and Sustaining Public Trust: The Role of Scientific Literacy

• Scientific literacy in the United States is low in comparison to other industrialized nations. Audiences may not recognize that:
  • The available evidence at any one time offers the best possible guidance for action
  • Scientific consensus is a legitimate path to greater certainty even among alternative explanations

• When scientific uncertainty is understood, trust increases and compliance with health guidance improves.

• Communicating early and often while conveying the potential for course correction, helps audience members focus on official information.

• The concept of scientific literacy also applies to Service members' understanding of evolving medical readiness requirements.

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Building and Sustaining Public Trust: The Role of Trusted Messengers in Cultures and Communities

- Identify trusted messengers, both inside and outside of the organization, and understand how they influence your audience

- Communicate regularly through trusted messengers within the organization

- Strengthen the trusted messenger role of health care providers

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Strategies to Optimize Health Communication

- Craft messages that resonate
  - Develop "boiled-down" or "gist-" type messages
  - Understand the emotions, psychology, and values of target audiences and develop messages that speak to them

- Communicate where your audience is likely to hear it

- Engage in two-way communication with message recipients

- Build effective communication teams

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Strategies to Optimize Health Communication: Building Effective Communication Teams

• Communication science is underemphasized in public health conversations. It is essential to health messaging success.

• Effective health communication teams should be comprised of public health experts, other relevant subject area health experts, and critically, health communication experts. Principles of communication science should be promulgated to communicators at all levels of the organization.

• Effective health communication requires a proactive, integrated team effort directed towards specific, meaningful goals. This is particularly true during a health emergency.

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Finding 6

Best practices

Health decision making is multidetermined. Trust is one factor that impacts how messages are received. Institutions and health communicators can protect, grow, and restore trust by addressing scientific uncertainty and leveraging trusted messengers. These principles also apply to communication about changes in medical readiness requirements that occur in response to evolving understanding of health risks.

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Finding 7

Health communicators can leverage specific strategies, including those used by other disciplines, to strengthen messaging impact.

Finding 8

Communication is a science. Effective health communication programs are built upon principles of communication science, informed by public health expertise, directed towards specific, meaningful goals, and executed by sufficiently trained communicators at all levels of the organization.
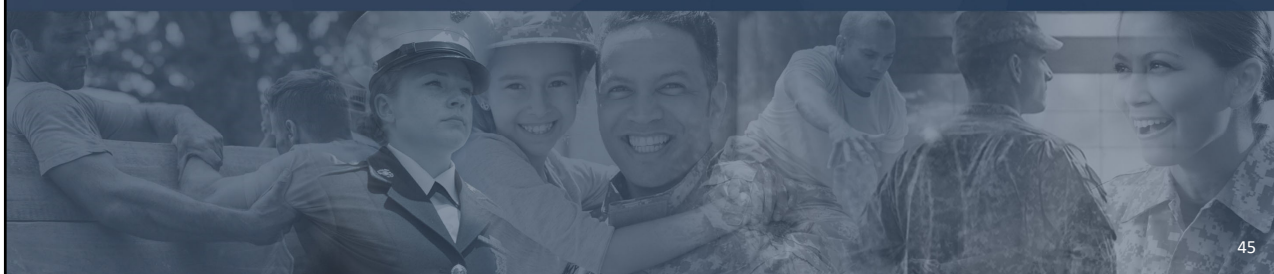
Way Ahead

- Finalize Recommendations and Report

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Questions

Back Up Slides

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Summary of Activities to Date

Meeting Date	Discussion Topics
Jan 20, 2023: PH Meeting	Potential Health Communications tasking
Jun 14, 2023: PH Meeting	Health Communications report development overview
Jun 28, 2023: DHB Meeting	DHA Strategic Communications
Jul 24, 2023: PH Meeting	• Follow-up from DHA Strategic Communications • Public health response to COVID-19
Aug 25, 2023: PH Meeting	• Military culture • Misinformation and disinformation • A perspective on government censorship • Science of health communications • Informal military communications panel

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Summary of Activities to Date

Sep 19, 2023: PH Meeting	• DoD/DHA legal authorities • Report Development
Oct 10, 2023: PH Meeting	• Public health communication strategies • Civic Online Reasoning
Oct 31, 2023: PH Meeting	Military spouse panel
Nov 21, 2023: PH Meeting	• Health Risk Communication • News and information environment
Nov 29, 2023: DHB Meeting	Tasker Update

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Summary of Activities to Date

Meeting Date	Discussion Topics
Dec 12, 2023: PH Meeting	• The deadly rise of anti-science • Report development discussion • Emergency communications and operations in the information environment
Jan 2, 2024: PH Meeting	• COVID-19 Learnings from the front lines • Report development discussion
Jan 16, 2024: PH Meeting	Report development discussion
Jan 30, 2024: PH Meeting	Report development discussion
Feb 27, 2024: PH Meeting	Report development discussion

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Summary of Activities to Date

Meeting Date	Discussion Topics
Mar 5, 2024: DHB Meeting	Tasker Update
Mar 15, 2024: PH Meeting	Discussion with Dr. Alleyne
Mar 26, 2024: PH Meeting	Report Development
Apr 9, 2024: PH Meeting	• Discussion with Dr. Graham and Dr. Maybank • Report Development
Apr 23, 2024: PH Meeting	• Discussion with Dr. Baur • Report Development
May 7, 2023: PH Meeting	Report Development
May 28, 2024: PH Meeting	Report Development

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