

FOCUS on Field Epidemiology

CASE FINDING AND LINE LISTING: A GUIDE FOR INVESTIGATORS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If there were a foodborne outbreak in your community, which specific facilities would you involve in your case finding activities? Do you already have an established relationship with these facilities?

Discussion Cues: Hospital ERs, clinical labs, health departments, clinics and physician offices might all be appropriate places to find additional cases. You may already have an established relationship with at least some of these facilities, but it might be helpful to send a letter, call or visit some of the others in order to introduce yourself, explain your work and how you might interact with the other facility in an outbreak situation. Having a contact person at each facility might also make it easier for future communications.

A recurring theme from public health practitioners during the 2002 anthrax outbreak was that it would have made the process easier if relationships had already been established between public health and other organizations, such as the police and FBI. Although the anthrax situation was very unique, the difficulty of having to establish relationships and lines of communication with other organizations during a very stressful time can be appreciated by any public health practitioner. If it is feasible and makes sense, doing some of this foot work during a “non-outbreak” period might be a good investment in terms of potential future outbreaks. The extent to which this may be reasonable somewhat depends on the size of your area of responsibility and available resources. For example, spending a lot of time and effort establishing contacts at facilities in which there is a high turnover rate might not be the best use of your time.

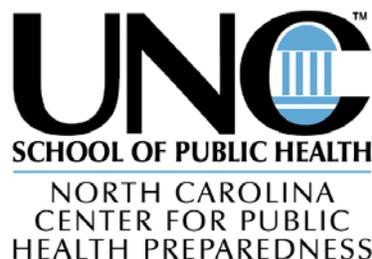
Other facilities that might be involved during a foodborne outbreak in your community include restaurants, grocery stores, food processing plants or food distribution plants.

2. What format would you use to create a line listing during an outbreak investigation (hard copy, electronic)? Why? If you would create an electronic version, what software would you use and do you already know how to set one up?

Discussion Cues: The basic format of a line listing is provided in the text of the Focus Issue. If you have never created one before, you might want to make up a scenario and draft one as a group, on paper or on the computer. If you would like to use software such as Microsoft Excel but are not familiar with it, ask someone who knows this program to show you how to create a table. It is quite straightforward and doesn't require any special epidemiologic skills-that will be left to you once the table is set up. If you want to use EpiInfo, look for free on-line help such as an EpiInfo tutorial on the CDC website. Again, if you have the time and resources, this is a skill that would be worth learning before an outbreak situation, rather than attempting to learn it during an outbreak (you'll have more than enough to keep you busy then!).

3. If you have participated in an outbreak investigation in the past, did you find any cases that were different from the sub-group that had initially been identified? Do you feel it was important to have identified the additional cases? Why or why not? How did finding these additional cases impact the course of the investigation?

Discussion Cues: Perhaps you have been involved in an investigation in which the first cases demonstrated the potential for a common exposure. If you continued your case finding efforts, did you, like the investigators involved in the Blastomycosis outbreak in North Carolina, identify additional cases that did not share the potential common exposure as the first cases? Perhaps finding these additional cases prevented you from drawing incorrect conclusions about the outbreak source or mode of transmission that you would have made if you based your inferences solely on the first subgroup of identified cases. In other situations, additional cases identified may all share the potential common exposure as the original cases-and your conclusions based on the original group of cases would have been correct. Either way, it is important to actively search for additional cases. Information gathered from as many cases as possible will guide the remainder of the investigation and will help ensure that you're going down the right investigational path.



The North Carolina Center for Public Health Preparedness is funded by a cooperative agreement between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Association of Schools of Public Health, Project # A1011-21/21