



FOCUS on Field Epidemiology

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Interviewing Techniques

You have been there... at home after a long day, enjoying dinner with the family or about to take the dog for a walk, when the phone rings. Someone on the other end of the line mispronounces your name and cannot be bothered to stop talking until everything in the sales pitch has been squeezed out. Frequently, you simply hang up. Sound familiar?

What would happen, though, if someone called you, mispronounced your name, and asked you to answer questions to help out the health department? What would it take to keep you on the line? Such interviews are a vital part of public health. Interviewing is thus an important, though sometimes difficult task. This issue of FOCUS provides guidelines for creating a comfortable environment for the interviewee, and asking both easy and tough questions during the interview.

As noted in the last issue of FOCUS (Volume 2 Issue 2: Designing Questionnaires), telephone interviews are a cost-effective way to conduct a study. In this issue, we concentrate on telephone interviews, but will also briefly discuss in-person interviews, since many of the techniques are the same.

Before you dial

Before contacting the first potential participant, familiarize yourself with the investigation and the questionnaire. Read each question carefully and ask a supervisor or coworker for

clarification if necessary. Remain enthusiastic and upbeat throughout the interview. A pleasant attitude on your part makes participating in the survey much easier for the person you are interviewing and helps to make being part of an outbreak investigation exciting and rewarding.

Introduction

As an interviewer, you must first introduce yourself, the organization you represent, and the purpose of the call. The survey being administered will have an introduction that should be followed word for word and delivered in a clear, concise and organized manner. Project a phone presence of confidence and enthusiasm. Speak slowly and enunciate clearly.

Always let the participant know that you will conduct the survey as quickly as possible, and give a time estimate if you can. Assure the interviewee that the information will be kept confidential. Also inform the respondent that he or she can choose to end the interview at any time, and that he or she can refuse to answer any question at any time.

The participant may want to know something about the outbreak or how the information obtained will be used, but do not provide details beyond those given in the introduction. Instead offer contact in-

formation for the state or county health department where additional questions can be directed.

In the context of an outbreak investigation, if the respondent agrees to the interview after hearing your introduction, that agreement is considered to constitute informed consent. Some agencies, however, may require that a written consent be mailed after the interview.

Survey questions

An important aspect of interviewing is asking the same questions in the same manner to each participant. Follow the script as closely as possible and do not offer extraneous information. Do not lead, suggest, or inject an opinion. If you disagree with the participant, do not argue; instead, remain neutral throughout the interview.

When necessary, prompt for clarification and probe beyond “I do not know.” Use silence first; then repeat the question. If necessary, use a neutral probing statement.

- For example, if the participant cannot recall eating at a particular restaurant in the past month one might offer, “Just to let you know, the time frame we are interested in is between the first day of school and Labor Day weekend.”

By placing the event in context, the interviewee may be able to better remember details. Sometimes, it may be helpful to prompt the respondent to get their calendar or day-planner before you begin the interview.

During the interview, the participant may provide additional voluntary information. Unless an open-ended question has been asked (e.g., where did you eat?), always record the answer to the survey question first, and then the additional information. (Scribbling in the margins of the survey is perfectly acceptable.) Although additional information is good, it will probably not be included in the analysis.

It is best to answer an interviewee’s questions, first by repeating the question, and second by offering general information.

- For example, if the question is “How many times have you eaten beef in the past week?” and the interviewee asks, “Well, I ate spaghetti with meat sauce, does that count?” an appropriate response would be, “Yes, this means all type of products containing beef.” An inappropriate response would be, “Well, I’m sure you’ve eaten more beef than that. I’ll just say that you’ve eaten it three times.”

Be careful not to lead the participant, and most importantly, never falsify answers! When an interviewer leads the respondent, this results in what is called ‘interviewer bias.’ Interviewer bias can also occur when the interviewer knows which exposures are hypothesized to have caused the outbreak. Interviewers should therefore be blind to the hypothesis.

- For example, say the main hypothesis is beef. You could introduce bias if there is follow up on the beef questions. You might ask case-patients, “Any other beef besides the meat sauce? Think hard, this is important. Everyone eats beef more than once a week.” However, you might say to controls, “Okay, one beef for you. Did you eat any chicken?” By encouraging case-patients and not controls to talk about beef, you could introduce a false association between illness and beef.

Probes

Occasionally, you will ask a question and the response will be uninformative or, worse, silence. The person may be thinking or unable to remember an answer to the question. For many questions, it may be appropriate to have a follow-up probe ready to help the participant think of an answer.

For open-ended questions, probes such as “Could you tell me more about that?” or “How did you feel about that?” might be appropriate.

For closed-ended questions, repeating the question or offering dates, times of day, or seasonal holidays might help a respondent remember.

- For example, the question “Where did you eat lunch on November 22?” could be followed up with, “That was the Sunday before Thanksgiving.”

Clarification

The people conducting the study should develop a protocol to deal with issues of clarification. When a participant asks for clarification, there are several possible ways to respond, but all interviewers should offer clarification in the same way.

- For example, if the interviewer asks, “Did you eat lunch at the Main Street Café on Sunday, November 22?” The respondent might ask, “Do you mean in the afternoon?”
 1. One option is to repeat the information in the question, “Lunch.”
 2. A second option is to refer to pre-determined definitions. The investigators in this case

might have defined “lunch” as “the main meal in the middle part of the day.” Or they could have defined it as “Any meal between 11am and 3pm.” The interviewer could communicate this definition to the respondent.

3. A third option would be to respond with, “Whatever lunch means to you,” or “Whatever you think of as lunch.”

Do not be afraid to tell a participant that you do not know the answers to questions asked. It is better to say you do not know than to give an incorrect answer.

Closing

At the end of the interview, remember to thank the participant for his or her time. Remain professional and pleasant, and provide contact information for any questions the participant may have about the investigation and/or the survey. Quickly review the survey before you conclude the interview to make sure all questions have been answered.

Face-to-face

Interviewing someone in person requires even more attention on the part of the interviewer. The interviewer must remain neutral in not only vocal tone, but also body language and facial expression, and must not show a reaction if the respondent says something unexpected. Here are a few tips on in-person interviewing:

Be neutral, yet attentive. Face the participant at a comfortable distance and maintain appropriate eye contact.

Be accepting of the participant. Do not express any judgment of the participant through your body language, tone, or facial expression.

Concentrate on what the participant is saying. Do not let your mind wander or interrupt the participant.

Common questions, problems, and solutions

Even the best written survey may not be clear to every person, so questions or problems are bound to arise. The following examples show the kind of questions you may encounter and give suggested responses.

- Interviewee: “What sorts of questions will you ask me?”
Your Response: Give examples of several questions

to the participant. Do not use threatening questions. The best idea may be to actually begin the interview so that the participant can see first hand.

- Interviewee: “What good are these surveys?” or “Surveys are a waste of time.”

Your Response: “Information from this survey will be used to identify why people are getting sick in your community (city, town, neighborhood) and help us stop transmission of the disease.”

- Interviewee: “I’m uncomfortable about giving out personal information.”

Your Response: “We can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable, and all information is confidential.”

- Interviewee: “How did you get my number?”

Your Response: “We maintain confidential health records here at the health department.”

- Interviewee: “I don’t have time to complete a survey.”

Your Response: Don’t argue with them—you don’t want to rush through the questions or have them end the survey halfway through. Instead, stress the importance of completing this survey. If they cannot complete the survey now, try to schedule the participant for a specific time to complete it.

Other issues

Language problems: If you are unable to understand what a participant is saying, ask the person to speak more slowly. If you still cannot understand, ask the person to reschedule and let your supervisor know. The study protocol may provide for a translator at the health department, or you may be able to ask a family member to translate. There should be a standard method of dealing with these situations.

Participant refuses to answer: If it is obvious that a participant is uncomfortable with a question, move on to the next question. Participants have the right to refuse to answer questions. If the respondent seems confused rather than reluctant, probe by asking if you are being clear.

Impatient or tired participant: If the participant becomes impatient or expresses fatigue during the interview, encourage the person by saying:

“This should only be a few more minutes (or name an

estimated amount of time). I will go as quickly as I can.”

“We really appreciate your help with this survey; this should only be a few more minutes of your time.”

If the participant refuses to continue or does not have enough time to finish the interview, find out a good time to call back and complete the interview, thank him or her and terminate the call. Note this on a debriefing form.

Participant gets off the subject: Do not sound uninterested in the participant’s digression, but do guide the conversation back to the question at hand. Some appropriate responses may be:

“That’s interesting! Now I want to ask you...”

“I do not want to keep you on the phone too long. Here’s the next question.”

“There are some questions about that later in the survey. Hold on to that thought for just a minute.”

Participant does not understand the question or gives irrelevant answer: If the participant does not seem to understand the question, do not say anything that would make the person feel bad. Instead, say something like, “I think I read that question wrong, let me repeat it.”

Participant asks for feedback, confirmation, or additional information: A participants may want to know if his or her answers are “right.” Rather than saying anything that could influence their responses, say that you “do not know” or that “there are no right or wrong answers.” Then move on to the next question.

Participant did not know he or she had the diagnosis in question: Inform the participant that the diagnosis was reported to the state health department by the person’s doctor (or by the lab to which the doctor sent specimens). Suggest that the participant call the doctor for more information on the diagnosis.

Conclusion

A great way to improve your interviewing techniques is to practice on co-workers or volunteers and obtain feedback. When you are conducting an interview, use active listening throughout the survey. That means keeping your ears open, acknowledging the participant, addressing concerns immediately, and putting together the information you receive into a big picture.

Remember that a good interview starts with a good questionnaire. Questions should always be asked in the same way for each participant. The interviewer should not prompt or lead the respondent to answers, which could introduce bias into the study. If you have problems or questions, always ask for assistance from your supervisor.

In phone interviews, a courteous and knowledgeable interviewer can be the difference between a hang-up and a completed questionnaire. By maintaining a professional but friendly approach throughout an interview, an interviewer can obtain important information that will help investigators identify the cause of an outbreak.

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UPCOMING TOPICS!

- Interviewing Techniques for Epi Studies
- Introduction to Forensic Epidemiology
- Differences between Public Health and Law Enforcement Investigations
- Risk Communication

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