



FOCUS on Field Epidemiology

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Cluster Investigations of Non-Infectious Disease

1. What is your health department's protocol for handling a report of a non-infectious disease cluster? Is there a written set of procedures?

It is a good idea to have a written protocol for handling a report of a non-infectious disease cluster. It is also good to communicate the general steps in this protocol to the public, so the public understands the actions the health department is (or is not) taking.

Is there a standard form where the information from a call or report is recorded? Are all complaints looked into? If not, what are the criteria for deciding whether to begin a preliminary investigation? Who is in charge of the investigation? Who is responsible for communicating with the media and the public? These are just some of the questions that a written protocol will address, making the work of the investigation go more smoothly.

2. What are some reasons that the public might be more concerned about a non-infectious disease cluster than a typical infectious disease outbreak?

While some infectious disease outbreaks certainly do cause a great deal of public concern, this reaction is more common in non-infectious disease clusters. A few suggested reasons for public concern are given here; some people may also be able to share insight from their own experiences.

- Man-made risks tend to be less acceptable than naturally-occurring risks, and the exposures suspected in non-infectious disease cluster may be of particular concern to the public. For example, contamination from a nuclear plant, toxic wastes or fumes emitted by factories, and water contamination from chemical dumping are potential exposures that the public may already fear.
- The consequences of non-infectious disease tend to be longer lasting. Some non-infectious diseases can have lifelong effects, while most infectious diseases can be resolved within days or weeks.
- The public may have a sense of lack of control. Infectious disease outbreaks are often due to a known cause (or at least a known pathogen). Non-infectious disease clusters can be scary if the mechanism of action is not known, particularly if children or other vulnerable groups are more highly affected.



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