

Community engagement in public health emergency preparedness

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Background:

Communities that could be affected by infectious disease outbreaks are increasingly recognised as resources that may be effectively utilized by the authorities during public health emergencies.

Methods:

This case study project, aiming to identify synergies between communities and authorities, was based on qualitative sources of evidence, including document and media review, stakeholder mapping, interviews and FGDs (N = 137). Four countries were selected for inclusion: Spain and the Netherlands on the basis of emerging tick-borne disease incidents; Iceland and Ireland on the basis of acute gastroenteritis outbreaks.

Results:

In the Netherlands and Spain strong synergies were identified in tick surveillance activities, and the value of pre-existing networks of interest groups for preparedness and response activities was recognised. The Icelandic norovirus event was unexpected and fast-moving, while VTEC in Ireland is a familiar and slower-burning challenge. As a relatively common disease in Ireland, VTEC-protocols are closely followed, while a generic all-hazards approach was taken in Iceland. There was considerable community support in the responses in both countries, and in Iceland community representatives also actively participated in producing institutional post-event evaluations.

Conclusions:

An over-riding principle emerging from this study is that an informed, at-risk community understands the challenges to adopting effective preventive practices for themselves better than anyone. Additional good practices included the utilisation of pre-existing stakeholder networks for information dissemination; and of monitoring community perceptions of any public health incident, including through social media, in order to identify and manage misperceptions. Efforts to build on the community engagement activities that are already in place in the four countries could contribute to better preparedness planning and more efficient and timely responses in future outbreaks.

Key messages:

- Recognise the community as a real partner in outbreak preparedness, response, and recovery.
- Optimise communications with communities who may be affected by outbreaks.