

The Public Health Role in Disaster Management

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Public Health plays a pivotal role during disaster. The spread of communicable diseases arising from contaminated water or foodstuffs must be limited, and if possible, prevented. In the event of a release ionizing radiation, although primarily a geographically restricted event, there is critical need to limit exposures, and to the greatest degree possible, mitigate the health impact on the population. To an even greater extent, there is a need to mitigate the spread of airborne communicable diseases such as influenza. In each of these scenarios, British Columbia Medical Health Officers are mandated to intervene and take a lead role in limiting spread of the hazard, and exposure of the population. However, the Medical Health Officer also may play a supporting role in situations in which another agency is the designated lead. Floods, forest fires, and hazardous materials releases represent situations in which the Medical Health Officer must play the role of the expert regarding human health.

Keywords: communicable diseases; disasters; exposure; hazardous materials; hazards; health officers; public health; radiation; roles

Unusual Communicable Diseases: Systematic Approach to Management

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In its now famous 1992 report, the U.S. Institute of Medicine recommended that emerging pathogens be targeted for study and resource allocation. The United States since has developed a formal national response plan to unusual or exotic communicable disease events; Canada, as yet, has no formal plan.

Following an incident of a suspected case of exotic communicable disease arriving at British Columbia's designated receiving, tertiary acute care hospital, a procedure was developed by the Medical Microbiology and Infection Control Team that eventually expanded to integrate with most of the key elements related to a provincial response template.

Since most of the population of the Province is located in the Vancouver Region, an Unusual Communicable Diseases Working Group was formed by an interdisciplinary group of professionals in this region. Members included persons in infection control, diagnostic microbiology, infectious diseases, disaster planning, first responders, administration, and public health. Activities included regular meetings to develop scenarios of presentation and response, a review of the components needed to plan for an unusual communicable disease event, communication of drafts with appropriate non-working group members, and tours of the local emergency communication/co-ordination facilities. Algorithms within the draft response template continue to be developed by this group (Biological Response Advisory Team) with other provincial and federal agencies, and are presented elsewhere in detail at this conference. It is anticipated that this template, including a clinical and laboratory response algorithms, will be useful in other jurisdictions for unusual, significant communicable disease events.

Keywords: algorithms; communicable disease; hospital; plan; planning; public health; team; template