

Formal assessment is better!

A training course in field epidemiology and outbreak investigation was conducted 2–8 September 2004 in Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands. This was the third of the similar trainings conducted in the past in American Associated Pacific Islands.

Approximately 30 candidates participated in this training, including two each from the Federated States of Micronesia and Nauru, three each from Kiribati, Ebeye, and Pohnpei, one from American Samoa and one from Chuuk. The rest were local health professionals from Majuro.

There were seven facilitators for this course. The overall facilitator/convenor of the workshop was Dr Michael O'Leary, PIHOA/CDC Regional Epidemiologist based in Guam, who was supported by Dr Tom Kiedrzyński, SPC Epidemiologist, and Dr Narendra Singh, SPC Communicable Disease Surveillance Specialist. Other facilitators included Dr Giuseppe Cuboni from the Fiji School of Medicine, School of Public Health and Primary Care, Dr Maria Concepcion Roces, Public Health Specialist from WHO WPRO in Manila, Mr Tim Sladden, HIV Surveillance Specialist at SPC, Mrs Maylinn Konelios, PHC Administrator and Dr Jean-Paul Chaine, PIHOA Regional Epidemiologist in Pohnpei.

The formal assessments were conducted and marked by Dr Giuseppe Cuboni and further processed for accreditation when requested by participants.

Funding for this workshop was provided by various agencies, CDC bioterrorism grant, WHO, PIHOA and SPC (through PREPARE project funded by France and NZAID).

The workshop's objectives were:

- to demonstrate understanding of the structure, role and functions of PPHSN and the role of EpiNet teams;
- to demonstrate understanding of the role of epidemiology in investigation of outbreaks and the steps to be followed in an outbreak investigation;
- to gain experience of epidemiological investigations through practical exercises;
- to demonstrate the understanding required to develop operational plans for activities of EpiNet teams or outbreak response teams.

A wide range of topics was covered, including introduction of field epidemiology, surveillance for outbreak detection, steps of outbreak investigations, descriptive epidemiology, analytical epidemiology, study methods, measures of association, chance bias and confounding, selection of controls and questionnaire design.

The sessions were mostly delivered in an interactive format using PowerPoint slides, and a variety of other methods of teaching were used. These included practical (questionnaire development, series of group activities, a real-time field exercise of outbreak data collection, collation) and analysis (problem-solving using problem-based scenarios and group discussions). We used three case studies of somewhat familiar outbreaks in the region to demonstrate different aspects or steps of outbreak investigations. The case studies were about toxic shellfish poisoning, measles outbreak and immunisation coverage and cholera outbreak.

This was the second time that this course was formally assessed by the Fiji School of Medicine School of Public Health and Primary Care staff with the intention of future accreditation towards postgraduate Public Health or Epidemiology qualifications. The formal

summative assessments included two small tests and an end-of-training written examination as per postgraduate examination regulations of the Fiji School of Medicine.

The training was formally evaluated using questionnaires, and almost all participants responded. The feedback was very informative. Generally very good assessment was given for the overall training; however, participants also gave very good feedback for making improvements to relevant sections or sessions as well.

Participants also responded favorably to supplementary questions regarding the value of assessments, accreditation of this course and future plans for studies with the Fiji School of Medicine. A vast majority (>85%) indicated that assessments were helpful and considered inclusion of formal assessments a good idea. Similar proportions indicated that academic credit was also important to them and that they planned to continue to study with the Fiji School of Medicine. This information was never established in any previous training, and the strong desire speaks volumes for future public health professional training needs and practice in the region.

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