

NEWS AND COMMENT

PUBLIC HEALTH UNIT MEETING

A meeting of Public Health Unit staff was held on November 30 at Rozelle Hospital. The following key points emerged:

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH GROUP

The group made several recommendations: that more communication occur between PHUs — directly and through the Bulletin; that all PHUs have a directory of information resources based on the health surveyors policy manual, 24-hour access to computerised databases, and protocols for dealing with health hazards posed by environmental toxins; and that training in environmental health be reviewed.

The group at its next meeting will discuss linkages between organisations concerned with environmental health, prepare a list of environmental health issues, and develop a plan for developing an environmental health strategy.

It was suggested that existing plans for dealing with environmental health hazards and lists of members of relevant committees be made available to PHUs.

That the Fire Brigade has information on the storage of chemicals suggested that the Environmental Health network could improve its links with organisations dealing with environmental pollution.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES GROUP REPORT

The group endorsed the new list of notifiable diseases proposed by the NSW Infectious Disease Advisory Committee and the use of CDC case definitions and made recommendations about information flow from laboratories to PHUs, information content of notification forms, and frequency of meetings.

A general practitioners survey will be conducted in seven PHUs to test notification forms.

The computerised infectious diseases data system is now available. PHUs should start entering data on the system by January 1, 1991.

COUNTRY PUBLIC HEALTH UNIT MEETING REPORT

The meeting looked at practical issues, aiming to identify differences and commonalities. Issues discussed included a fish kill strategy, pesticides in the cotton industry, overseas travel and linking public health medicine training with PHUs.

Changes to the role of environmental health officer were fully supported and the development of links with food inspectors encouraged.

The cost of travel — in money and time — discouraged quarterly PHU meetings, so annual meetings should be considered. One person should represent all regions on each special interest group.

TRAVEL HEALTH ADVICE

Travel health advice consumes substantial PHU resources. David Jeffs and others agreed to advance options for handling this load to the infectious diseases group.

HEALTH PROMOTION

The health promotion budget has doubled since 1986 to more than \$18 million. Sixty per cent of this is distributed to Areas/Regions. In the past two years national and State policies have been developed, with priorities given to nutrition, older people, injuries, cancers, and cardiovascular disease.

Michael Ward indicated that the Department has been instructed to develop specific health goals. PHU and health promotion staff can collaborate to set realistic goals and to develop action and evaluation plans.

GAZETTEL OF MEDICAL OFFICERS OF HEALTH (MOHs)

The list of MOHs for each Area/Region will be gazetted shortly.

THE LEGIONELLA COMMITTEE REPORT

Tony Burns outlined the functions of the committee and the recommendations of the report.

AIDS NOTIFICATIONS

A recent search for unreported cases of AIDS netted 122 new notifications. These notifications attract \$3.5 million of Commonwealth funding for AIDS services.

To improve AIDS surveillance, each Area/Region was asked to provide an HIV/AIDS surveillance contact person, who should liaise with Tim Sladden of the Epidemiology Branch and regularly contact specialist AIDS treatment centres, base hospitals, sexual health services and other doctors who treat people with AIDS.

There was debate about the AIDS notification mechanism. A handout to assist in AIDS surveillance has been produced, including notification forms, a summary of AIDS notification procedure and CDC definitions.

HEALTH INDICATOR FACT SHEETS

Health Indicator Fact Sheets will be produced from available morbidity and mortality figures. The monthly sheets will aim to be brief and useful to planners, evaluators and program staff. The first appears with this Bulletin issue.

IMMUNISATION

The Health and Education Departments should co-ordinate efforts to improve information on and immunisation levels of schoolchildren. This collaboration will be the one area of focus of the Health Department review of immunisation to be completed by May 1991.

SENTINEL PRACTICE IN THE ILLAWARRA

David Jeffs presented an overview of the Illawarra GP Sentinel Surveillance System (see article on Page 51). When concern was raised about Legionnaires' disease in the Illawarra, the sentinel network was useful in assessing general practice attendances for respiratory tract infections and unusual symptoms. Other PHUs should consider the value of establishing small sentinel surveillance networks.

NEWS AND COMMENT

THE ILLAWARRA LEAD STUDY

Blood lead levels were monitored among 170 children in Illawarra primary schools. The study, which was expensive and difficult to perform, involved concerned companies.

PUBLIC HEALTH BULLETIN

The Public Health Bulletin has been delayed by technical and editorial problems. From January, the target will be for Bulletins to appear every second week of the month. It is important to have a rapid turnaround and for State data to be published locally, before publication in the national forum.

The Bulletin offers an important mode of communication between PHUs. It could include reports of meetings, program successes and failures, debates on issues and ideas.

If production problems continued, a plainer format could be considered. But with the appointment of a new sub editor, timely production is expected.

PUBLIC HEALTH TRAINING

There are six Public Health Medicine Registrars, with four more and two Health Services Management Registrars joining the scheme in 1991. Approval has been given to the selection of three non-medical public health trainees.

A group has been formed to develop a plan for future public health training in NSW.

Public health educational sessions should be timed to allow access to staff outside central administration. Short courses in aspects of public health should be developed.

TUBERCULOSIS

The Department has approved the reorganisation of tuberculosis services into the public health system. Margaret Thomas has moved into the Epidemiology Branch. CEOs will be asked to integrate tuberculosis sisters into the PHUs.

The Department is developing a plan to eradicate tuberculosis. South Australia has set as a target the year 2017. A tuberculosis advisory committee has been formed, consisting of the Deputy Chief Health Officer, representatives from the Thoracic Society, Chest Association and two PHUs.

ASTHMA

In the hours after a thunderstorm on November 1 a large number of people attended Tamworth Casualty with asthma. By the end of the week, 96 cases had been to casualty. Attendances in nearby towns were more than 10 times the rate in other areas.

Stephen Corbett outlined the results of an investigation of the outbreak of asthma in Tamworth. While outbreaks have been investigated elsewhere, this appears to be the first thorough study of a non-point source outbreak.

HIV INJURY SURVEILLANCE

The Department plans to introduce surveillance of health care workers exposed to HIV-infected blood and body fluids. The real risk, number of people exposed and outcomes are unknown in NSW. Surveillance will be hospital-based and linked with zidovudine prophylaxis protocols.

PHUs will be asked to distribute forms and information to all hospitals. Follow-up initially will be arranged centrally. A hospital infection control seminar is planned for next year.

FUTURE MEETINGS

Directors of PHUs will meet in the morning to discuss administrative issues and other interested parties will join in the afternoon for broader discussion. Meetings should be timed to coincide with short courses or special interest group meetings. The next meeting is scheduled for March 7 at the Rozelle Conference Centre. Agenda items should be sent to George Rubin.

IN TOUCH ARTICLE DECEMBER ISSUE

The Public Health Association of Australasia requested an article on the Public Health Units for its December issue. Watch out for it!

Health in New South Wales: Current Indicators is now available. To obtain a copy please call Ashley Curtis on (02) 391 9223 or write to the editor.

PUBLIC HEALTH EDITORIAL STAFF

The Bulletin's editorial advisory panel is as follows:

Dr Sue Morey, Chief Health Officer, Department of Health; Professor Stephen Leeder, Professor of Community Medicine, University of Sydney; Professor Geoffrey Berry, Professor of Epidemiology & Biostatistics, University of Sydney; Dr Robert Reznik, Acting Director, Department of Community Medicine, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital; Professor Ian Webster, Professor of Community Medicine, University of NSW; Dr Christine Bennett, Acting Associate Director, Service Development, Department of Health; Dr Michael Frommer, Epidemiologist, Epidemiology & Health Services Evaluation Branch; Ms Jane Hall, Research Officer, Department of Community Medicine, Westmead Hospital; and Mr Michael Ward, Manager, Health Promotions Unit, Department of Health.

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Suggestions for improving the reporting of infectious diseases are most welcome.