

Rapid health assessments

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Rapid health assessments (RHAs) are used during an emergency response to gather information about the health status and needs of an affected population. They are a systematic way of collecting information in a complex emergency situation, with the information gathered assisting in planning, directing and implementing an appropriate response.¹ RHAs provide decision makers and partner agencies with a rapid insight into the health needs of an affected population.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends RHAs should be completed as soon as possible following an emergency and performed by a multidisciplinary team of qualified personnel, with an appropriate range of expertise.² The WHO outlines four steps in a RHA: planning, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings, and presentation of results and conclusions.² RHAs can be used in a range of emergency settings and focus on different areas of concern; they can be completed in an international or local context and gather information on issues such as mental health, communicable disease and nutrition.

Rapid health assessments in an international context

RHAs are commonly used as part of an international public health emergency response; an example is the use of a RHA in a refugee or internally displaced persons camp. In this situation, RHAs involve the collection of information describing the demographics, mortality, morbidity, nutritional status, vital needs, shelter and security of the population. This information enables the prioritisation of interventions and identifies areas requiring further assessment. In a refugee or internally displaced persons camp, control and prevention of communicable disease and potential epidemics is a high priority; as a result, mass vaccination against measles is an important intervention which may occur following a RHA. Within large refugee camps and internally displaced persons camps continuous rapid assessments using networks of clinics, camp coordinators and camp visitors are used to monitor the evolving health profile within the camp.

Rapid health assessments in a local context

RHAs may be required as part of a public health emergency response following a natural disaster such as severe storm

or flood. In a local response, a RHA would be completed in coordination with relevant emergency response organisations and may contribute to the overall initial impact assessment, completed by the Local Emergency Operations Controller during the response phase.

As a type of RHA, rapid cluster surveys can provide information to assist in preparing and planning for natural disasters. A local example of a rapid cluster survey was completed following a storm disaster in the Hunter region of NSW. The aim of the survey was to describe the impact of the storm, assess household disaster preparedness and identify information sources used before and during the disaster.³ The survey found that: the storm had a major impact on households and essential services, many households lack basic disaster equipment including radios/batteries, local radio networks provide the most useful information, and awareness of the disaster role of local media networks could be strengthened.³ There were a number of public health implications from the survey findings such as the need for: promoting the role of media networks during disasters, encouraging disaster preparation in households, and ensuring good communication occurs between emergency management organisations.³

For a RHA to be completed successfully the best available source of information should be determined, with the information collected addressing the needs of the users. Standardised methods and coordination should occur throughout the process to assist in distinguishing between emergency and long-term needs of the affected population.⁴ RHAs are a practical and functional tool that can be used as part of a public health emergency response to identify health needs and assist with prioritisation of services.

References

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