

# NEWS AND COMMENT

## NEW PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICERS

**O**n 25 March, five new officers joined the NSW Public Health Training Program. These non-medical officers are skilled in a number of areas, including pharmacy, physiotherapy, health planning, brain anatomy and physiology, medical records administration and research project management. The training program now comprises 17 medical officers.

## IMMUNISATION 1991: THE OLD AND THE NEW

**T**he 2nd National Public Health Association Immunisation Conference will be held at the Canberra Convention Centre on 27-29 May, 1991. It has an exciting program with national, regional and international speakers. Registration is about \$120 for the three days. Anyone with an interest in immunisation is invited to attend. Enquiries to Immunisation Conference Secretariat (02) 449 1525.

## PUBLIC HEALTH UNIT MEETING

**T**he Public Health Unit meeting was held at the Health Department's Central Office on 7 March 1991. Unit Directors met in the morning and the general meeting was held in the afternoon.

Key issues discussed at the meetings were as follows:

### Environmental Health Officers (EHOs)

Greg Stewart will co-ordinate the development of recommendations for distribution of EHO positions. Epidemiology Branch staff will look into obtaining additional funds to cover EHO transfer costs.

### Public health nurses

Liz Sullivan will organise a meeting of public health nurses to discuss their training needs.

### EHO trainees

The Environmental Health Special Interest Group (SIG) will assess the needs of EHO trainees and develop training options.

### Enhancement funding

Proposals for enhancement funding totalling \$1.3 million have been received. Selection criteria were set and the Epidemiology and Health Services Evaluation Branch (EHSEB) staff have been asked to select proposals for funding.

### Health advice for travellers

Maryan Heffernan circulated draft information sheets on health plans for travellers. The information sheets will be made available to all PHUs for distribution. George Rubin says that PHUs are encouraged to develop their own policies on providing travel health information to the public.

The Epidemiology and Health Services Evaluation Branch will continue to make MASTA available to

PHUs while the Infectious Disease Special Interest Group develops recommendations on a plan for improving the distribution of travel health data.

### Infant autopsy services

Michael Frommer outlined the proposal of the recently reconvened NSW Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Advisory Committee to develop a capacity for performing high-quality forensic infant autopsies. These autopsies will form part of an unexpected infant death surveillance program.

Michael Frommer asked PHU directors to collate information on existing pathology services in the country Regions and in the Illawarra and Central Coast Areas. This will be a first step towards establishing a network of pathologists willing to do forensic autopsies after unexpected infant deaths. The autopsies would follow a set protocol.

### Infectious disease special interest group

Michael Levy reported several items:

- General practitioners seem to favour a reporting form (with tick boxes) which includes AIDS and other notifiable conditions.
- It is unlikely that TB sisters will be easily assimilated into PHUs due to responsibilities outside public health.
- Representation has been made to the Chief Health Officer requesting a Departmental guarantee that PHUs will not have to pay for Rifampicin supplies out of their budgets.
- Draft protocols continue to be reviewed.
- The Infectious Disease Special Interest Group will meet three monthly instead of monthly.

### Environmental health strategy

Stephen Corbett reports that the Department is developing an environmental health strategy with the help of Michael Hensley, Dennis Calvert, Chris Ewan and others. The group had:

- discussed the requirements for training environmental health officers;
- discussed the need for the Health Department to clarify its role with respect to that of the new Environmental Protection Agency;
- suggested that the special interest groups meet three monthly on the day before the PHU general meetings.

### Training plan

David Jeffs presented a draft plan for identifying priorities for the NSW public health training program. After much discussion, it was agreed that the program's first priority was to train PHU and Central Administration public health professionals.

PHUs have been asked to send in their comments on the draft plan to David Jeffs in the next two weeks,



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along with a plan for the training needs of their professional staff. Training in the use of EPIINFO5 was identified as an immediate need for many PHU staff. Gavin Stewart will organise a program for this training to take place.

## **Reproductive health group**

Michael Frommer invited interested Public Health Unit and Epidemiology Branch staff to join a reproductive health special interest group, to be convened in the next few weeks.

Issues to be considered include the use of the regional perinatal data, the Birth Defects Register, monitoring unexpected infant deaths and developing an abortion surveillance program (initially focusing on induced abortions following antenatal diagnosis of fetal abnormalities).

## **Dumps of perinatal data available**

Michael Frommer advised Public Health Unit staff that dumps of Area/Regional data from the NSW Midwives' Collection (previously known as the Maternal and Perinatal Data Collection) will be offered to PHU Directors within the next few weeks.

The data will comprise unit records, with all personal identification removed. Each Area/Region will receive information on births to women who live in the Area/Region.

In order to receive the data, each PHU director will be asked to undertake in writing that s/he:

- will adhere to the confidentiality and data security policy of the Collection;
- will consult the Epidemiology Branch before any public release of aggregate data. The latter provision is intended to avoid inconsistencies in the interpretation of the data.

The initial release will comprise 1987 data, to be followed by some 1990 data. Subsequently, 1988 and 1989 data will be issued.

## **Midwives' Data Collection video**

Michael Frommer distributed a copy of the new Midwives' Data Collection video to each Public Health Unit. The video, produced by the Department's Health Media Education Centre, is intended to motivate midwives' compliance with data collection.

Michael Frommer urged PHU directors to make the video available for loan, particularly to hospital maternity units and independent midwives. Additional copies are available from Margaret Pym, Liaison Midwife (02) 391 9199.

## **Infectious Disease Data System (IDDS)**

All PHUs should be entering infectious disease data themselves now. Gavin Stewart asked that PHU staff try out the current system without modification until a review of the IDDS in three months time.

## **Healthnet Computer System**

Gavin Stewart introduced a discussion on the computer requirements of the public health network. The following points were made:

- There is a need for PHUs to have adequate data storage facilities to handle large data sets locally.
- Health information systems are being trialled in 23 general practices.
- The statewide health communication system is being improved.
- PHU staff wishing to establish direct linkage with the communication network should approach their Area/Regional computer manager in the first instance.

## **Health statistics and disease surveillance**

David Lyle reported on the National Priorities for Health Statistics Forum held recently in Canberra. Public access to data was discussed at the meeting.

Other issues considered at the Forum were the lack of primary care and mental health data sets, and the perennial problem of data linkage.

## **Blue-green algae**

Peter Christopher presented some data from his recent investigation into the contamination of water supplies at Lake Cargelligo by a toxin-producing *anabaena* species of blue-green algae.

A reported outbreak of a gastrointestinal illness in the town was thought not to be related to this algal bloom. The prevention of health problems related to the eutrophication of inland waterways will largely depend upon a review of agricultural practices in vulnerable areas.

## **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.