

Joint Occupational Health/Clinician Tabletop Response Exercise

Prompt identification of, and response to, occupational health hazards requires both expertise and coordination between clinicians and public health. Clinicians need to be able to identify work as a possible source of patient symptoms, know which conditions are reportable, and report them to public health authorities. It falls on occupational health programs to educate clinicians and other stakeholders on these points and to facilitate reporting as much as possible.

The Challenge

In reality, clinicians and public health authorities often operate in silos with minimal communication. Few clinicians receive the occupational health training which would allow them to identify common occupational diseases, or even to refer patients to occupational medicine providers. Occupational health programs and providers, both, may have unrealistic expectations of the capacity of the other to identify and address occupational health hazards. As a result, cases are likely to remain significantly under-reported, hampering the ability of occupational health surveillance to capture the extent of reportable conditions and to discover new or re-emerging health threats to workers.

The Response

One way to begin to break down silos and address such issues is to develop venues for bringing clinicians and occupational health programs together. In November 2023, Wisconsin organized its first occupational surveillance tabletop exercise. The exercise was led by Dr. Sheryl Bedno, Wisconsin Department of Health Services' new chief medical officer for environmental and occupational health and prior faculty at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Leveraging Dr. Bedno's connections, the exercise brought together Wisconsin's Occupational Health and Safety Surveillance Program, University of Wisconsin Preventive Medicine residents, Rutgers University Occupational Medicine and Preventive Medicine residents, and New Jersey Occupational Health Surveillance Program staff. Participants used a two-hour Zoom session to review and discuss a fictional occupational health scenario. The goals of the exercise were to 1) discuss a challenging public health scenario among a multidisciplinary group of professionals; 2) evaluate the occupational health implications and recommend clinical solutions, hazard controls, and worker education; 3) describe applicable local, state and/or federal reporting requirements and regulations and compare requirements between the two participating states.

The Impact

The exercise was well attended and participants deeply engaged the material. In addition to providing a forum for joint case review, the situation afforded an opportunity for networking and helped uncover misunderstandings and gaps in the reporting and response systems. Communication strategies and the limitations of public health enforcement mechanisms were key areas of discussion. The exercise paved the way for future collaborations between medicine and public health—including residency rotation placements within Wisconsin's occupational surveillance program—and there was sufficient enthusiasm to organize future tabletop exercises. Such brief, low-effort exercises are recommended to other state surveillance programs as a way to break down silos and strengthen key relationships between clinicians and public health practitioners.