Principles and steps of an outbreak investigation

Module 2.1







What is an outbreak?

- Unexpected increase in cases in a specific place and time
- Exceedance of a predefined alert threshold
- Two or more cases of disease linked to the same source

What is an waterborne outbreak? - WHO definition

At least two people experience a similar illness after exposure to water and the evidence suggests a probable water source

(Large water supply) waterborne outbreaks

- Associated with watershed events:
 - Defects in the water-treatment process or distribution system
 - Exceedance of water-quality parameters
- Sudden, rapid and widespread occurrence of gastrointestinal consultations
- · Clustering of cases in a particular water-supply zone

When to investigate a waterborne outbreak?

- The outbreak is likely to continue if no intervention
- Unknown source
- Unknown cause
- Severe and/or unusual disease
- Large number of cases

When to investigate a waterborne outbreak?

- A full investigation may not be required if the agent and without the need for further leady heen controlled without has already heen controlled source can be identified with reak has already heen controlled source can be identified with reak has already heen controlled the outbreak has already heen controlled the contr The outbreak is likely to continue if no interest
- Unknown source
- Unknown cause
- Severe and/or
- source can be identified without the need for further led investigations and the outbreak has already been controlled Larc

Outbreak investigation objectives

- Confirm the outbreak
- Identify the source and contributing factors
- Implement control measures

→ In order prevent further cases

Outbreak investigation steps

- Differ from outbreak to outbreak
- Simultaneous and in parallel
- Control measures as early as possible
- Communication on an ongoing basis

10 step approach

- 1. Detect and confirm the outbreak and agent
- 2. Rapid Response Team (RRT)
- 3. Define cases
- 4. Identify cases and obtain information
- 5. Descriptive epidemiological investigation (time, place, person)
- 6. Additional studies (environmental, risk assessments, laboratory)
- 7. Interview cases and generate hypotheses
- 8. Evaluate the hypotheses
- 9. Inform risk managers and implement control measures
- 10. Communicate findings, make recommendations and evaluate the outbreak response

Health-care systems

- Detection by surveillance systems
 - Indicator and event based surveillance
 - Epidemiological
 - Microbiological
- Health-care facilities reports

Water quality

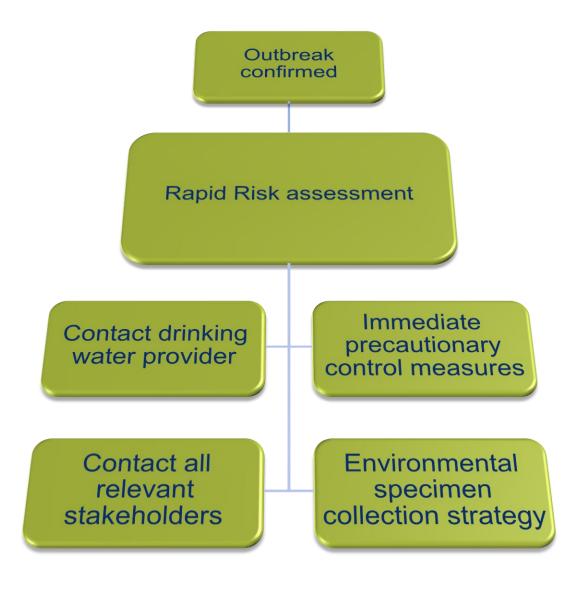
- Routine samples with faecal bacteria
- Water treatment or distribution failures
- User complaints

Other signals

- Absenteeism from work, schools
- Increased sales of certain medications
- Media reports

Is the outbreak real? -> More cases than expected?

Seasonal variations?
Notification artefacts?
New surveillance system?
Diagnostic bias?



Identifying the microorganism helps to:

- develop a hypothesis about the source (previous events)
- identify time of exposure (incubation period)
- choose control measures

- Do not wait for lab results to start the investigation
- Confirm a proportion of cases

- Time between the contamination event and the outbreak detection
 - Long incubation periods
 - Few cases go to the doctor ("peak of the inceberg")
- Longer delay → lower probability of detecting the agent in water
- Relevant water samples may no longer be available

Country example

Large waterborne *Campylobacter* outbreak in Norway in 2019

Hyllestad et al. (2020), Eurosurveillance

Available from:

https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.35.2000011

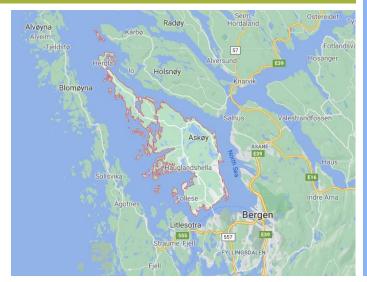
Step 1. Detect and confirm the existence of the outbreak and confirm the causative agent

6 June 2019, Askøy, Norway.

- In 24 h, 10 people **hospitalized** with fever, abdominal pain and diarrhea, and 30 **consultations** from out-of-hours primary healthcare services.
- Many patients presenting with gastroenteritis had home addresses near each other
 - → drinking-water?
- One person tested positive for **Campylobacter**
- Medical Officer in Askøy reports the outbreak to the Norwegian Institute of Public Health.

Outbreak context

- Island municipality Askøy, Norway
- 29,500 inhabitants





Outbreak context

- Three different water supply systems in Askøy: A,B,C
- Water Supply System A (WSS-A) from the 1950s, serves ca. 12,000 people in the south of the island.
- WSS-A has 9 reservoirs, including 3 built as unlined mountain caverns.
- One of these reservoirs was reservoir X

Step 1. Detect and confirm the existence of the outbreak and confirm the causative agent

Immediate precautionary control measures taken once outbreak detected

- 6 June: Boil Water Advice issued
- 7 June: Reservoir X taken out of service



Stakeholder	Role			
Local/regional public Health agency	Overall coordination			
Food/water authority	Environmental investigation			
Water supplier	Control measures implementation			
Health- care providers	Case management			
Laboratory	Microbiological investigation			

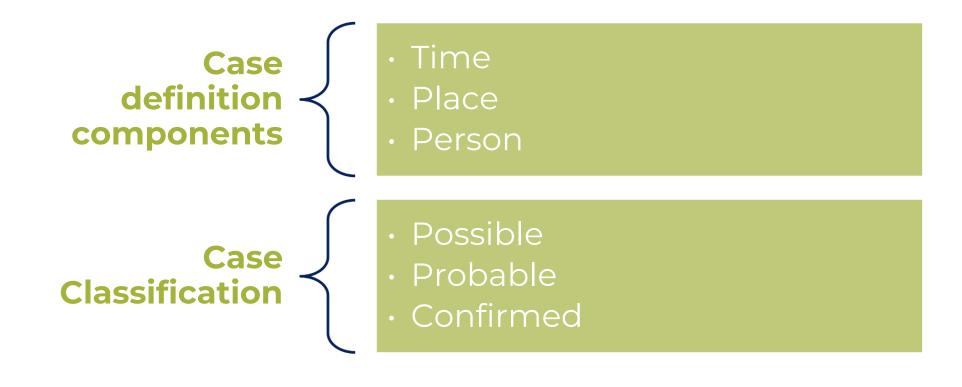
Communication experts!!

Coordinating activities across agencies can be difficult

- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Teams before an outbreak occurs
- Contact meetings and exercises between crisis

- Complete investigation planned
 - Epidemiological
 - Microbiological
 - Environmental
- Municipal services
- Norwegian Food Safety Authority
- Norwegian Institute of Public Health

Step 3: Define cases



Step 3: Define cases



"A person (who?) living in town XXXX (where?), with diarrhoea (≥ 3 loose stools in 24 hours) and any one of the following symptoms – abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting (who?) – and date of onset of symptoms from 1 August 2020 (when?) and not travel history (who?, where?)."

In order to:

- Estimate the size of the outbreak and its distribution
- Determine the population at risk
- Enroll patients
 - hypothesis-generating pilot interviews
 - descriptive and analytical epidemiology
- Identify patients who need treatment

How?

- Passive case finding > Existing surveillance system.
- Active case finding
 - Additional laboratories not part of national surveillance systems
 - Public and private hospitals or primary healthcare centers
 - People at risk: school children, nursing homes, mass gatherings
 - Invitation lists, reservation lists, guest lists

Line List

- Basic information on each case
 - ID, age, type of case, sex, phone number, residence, clinical information....
- One line per case
- Spreadsheet
- Updated as the investigation develops

- Facilitates systematization of the information
- Provides an overall picture

	Α	В	C	D	E	F	G	Н
1	ID	Sex	Age	District	Adress	Phone	Hospital admision	Interviewed?
2	1	M	17	Α	Water Street	99999	N	Y
3	2	М	27	Α	Water Street	88888	N	Y
4	3	F	53	Α	Water Street	77777	N	Y
5	4	F	81	Α	Water Street	66666	N	Y
6	5	F	23	В	Water Street	55555	Υ	Y
7	6	M	44	В	Lake Street	44444	N	N
8	7	F	38	В	Pound Square	33333	?	N
9								

Pilot interviews

- Standardized questionnaire:
 - clinical information, risk factors and demographics
- Comprehensive: all relevant exposures
- Few interviewers
- Sample of cases

- Obvious common exposures?
- Exclude exposures?

		¬							
9. What kind of water supply do you have in your household?									
Does the water come from a water work or do you have a private water sup	oly for just your household?	Г							
Yes No Uns	ure Details (for instance name of the water work):		1. What kind of symptoms did you ha	ave?					
Water work for at least 20 households	1		Please specify when the symptoms st	started (date, time) and how long they lasted (no. of days or hours)					
Water work for fewer than 20 households]								
Private water supply for just your household	1			Yes	No Unsur	e When did the symptoms begin?	Duration?		
Private water supply for just your nouseriold			Nausea			, , , ,			
	L	1	Vomiting						
	11. Did you drink tap water, either at hom	ne or elsewhere, during the week before you got	Abdominal pain						
			Diarrhea (how frequent?)						
	Also include water used to make juice, lem	ionade of ice cubes	Bloody stools						
	At home: Yes No Unsure	If yes, how many glasses per day? (1-2, :	Fever						
	At nome: res No Onsure	II yes, now many glasses per day: (1-2, 1	Joint pain						
			Other symptoms (what kind?)						
	Elsewhere: Yes No Unsure	Elsewhere: Yes No Unsure If yes, how many glasses per day? (1-2,			If the fever was measured: How many degrees?				
If you have a private water supply for just your household, or if you receive with the water come from?	Where?				in the level was measured. Now many degrees.				
What kind of source does the water come from:	White	White the state of							
Yes No Uns	ure Deta	+	2. When did you become ill?	Date / tim	ie:	(Date when you t	first noticed symptoms)		
Lake, river or brook									
Borehole, groundwater well	12. Did you drink water directly from a lak	12. Did you drink water directly from a lake, pond, river or brook? (for instance while hiki		Days / hours: Are you still sick?					
	1	,							
Dug well L L	Yes No Unsure	If yes, where?	4. B						
					4. Do you know other persons who had similar symptoms in the week before or the week after the day when your illness started? If the answer is yes, did the person(s) become ill before or after your illness began?				
10. Is your drinking water treated (disinfected with chlorine or UV)?									
	13. Did you drink any water from a well or	13. Did you drink any water from a well or cistern? (for instance at a holiday cabin or tourist cabin)							
Yes No Unsure If yes, what kind of treatment?				— I					
	Yes No Unsure	Yes No Unsure If yes, where? 14. Did you drink bottled water or water from a container?							
	14. Did you drink bottled water or water f								
	,								
	Yes No Unsure	Yes No Unsure If yes, what kind of water?							

Questionnaires distribution

- Email
- Web questionnaires
- Telephone interviews
- Paper questionnaires by mail
- Social media

Step 5: Descriptive epidemiological investigation

What do cases have in common? -> Generate hypothesis

Time

When were they infected?

Place

Where were they infected? Where do they live?

Person

What are the symptoms and etiology? Who was infected?

Step 3: Define cases Step 4: Identify cases and obtain information Step 5: Descriptive epidemiological investigation

- Outbreak monitoring → Determine the extend of the outbreak
 - Case finding: gastroenteritis consultations
 - Map gastroenteritis consultations
 - Trawling questionnaires to first campylobacteriosis cases
- Survey childcare centres → Ascertain start and distribution of the outbreak and document absence for illness

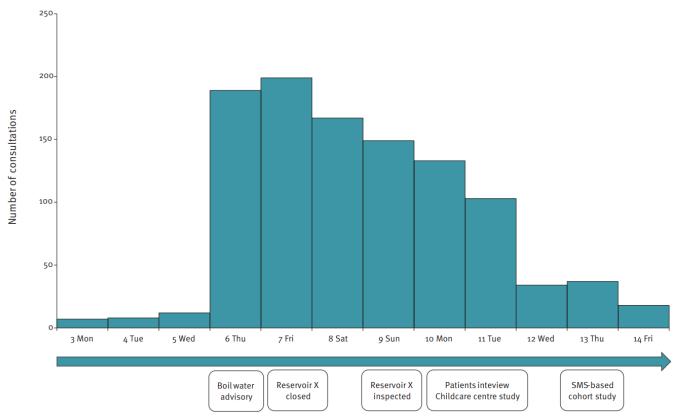
Step 3: Define cases Step 4: Identify cases and obtain information Step 5: Descriptive epidemiological investigation

Outbreak monitoring -> Determine the extend of the outbreak

- Case finding: Gastroenteritis consultations (who?) at primary care in Askøy (where?) between 3 June and 15 June (when?)
- Map consultations by household address and water supply
- Trawling questionnaires to first campylobacteriosis cases
 - Food consumption
 - Animal contact
 - Environmental exposures
 - Clinical and demographical information

Step 3: Define cases Step 4: Identify cases and obtain information Step 5: Descriptive epidemiological investigation

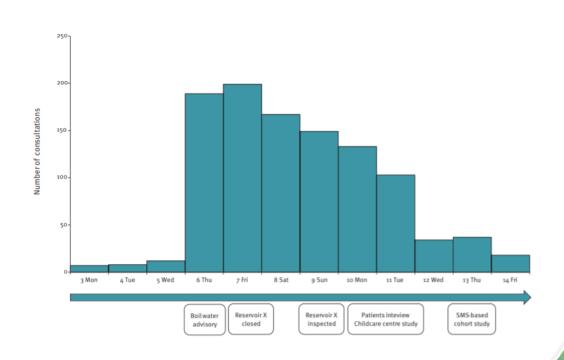
Number of gastroenterititis consultations at general practitioner and out-of-hours primary healthcare services



Hyllestad et al. (2020): Large waterborne *Campylobacter* outbreak: use of multiple approaches to investigate contamination of the drinking water supply system, Norway, June 2019. Eurosurveillance, https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.35.2000011

Outbreak monitoring

- Sharp increase in gastroenteritis consultations (from 12 to 182 consultations) on Thursday 6 June
- Consultations evenly distributed among all age groups, although in-person consultations were primarily for children



Hyllestad et al. (2020): Large waterborne *Campylobacter* outbreak: use of multiple approaches to investigate contamination of the drinking water supply system, Norway, June 2019. Eurosurveillance, https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.35.2000011

Water supply zones of water supply system WSS-A defined by different reservoirs Zones 6, 7 and 8 were served by Reservoir X.



Estimated incidence rates for gastroenteritis consultations linked to reservoir supply zones



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Outbreak monitoring

Gastroenteritis patients' residences were coincided with three water supply zones served by Reservoir X.

The three zones with Incidence Rate > 1 are the ones served by Reservoir X.



Outbreak monitoring

- Trawling questionnaires to five campylobacteriosis cases.
 - Diarrhoea, stomach pain and fever (onset 4-5 June)
 - Tap water at home in the week before symptom onset
 - Attendance to events, food items, contact with animals or recreational water not common to all five cases

Survey of childcare centres

- Case definition: any person absent from the childcare centre (child or employee) because of diarrhoea or vomiting (who?, where?) between 28 May and 7 June (when?)
- •Comparison of **attack rates** in childcare centres served/not served by Reservoir X

Survey of childcare centres

- All childcare centres (n=27) in the municipality participated in the study. Eight (769 children and employees) in areas supplied by Reservoir X and 19 (1,761 children and employees) in areas supplied by other reservoirs.
 - Childcare centres in affected areas: Attack rate: 20%
 - Childcare centres in unaffected areas: Attack rate 2%
- Absences started to increase at the childcare centres in affected areas on 3
 June (n=26) and peaked on 7 June with 81 absences

- → Environmental investigation
- → Laboratory investigation of the water supply system

Step 6: Additional studies Environmental investigation

1) Description of the water supply system

- Water source
- Abstraction points and distribution network
- Treatment processes
- Storage tanks
- Distribution network
- Location of potential contamination sources

Step 6: Additional studies Environmental investigation

2) Rapid system assessment → Hazardous events? Control measures in place?

- Interview water-supply system personnel
- Review outcomes of sanitary surveys
- Assess water quality information and weather records
- Operational records and procedures: any problems compromising control measures?
- Customer complaint reports
- Non-piped systems: Review water collection, transport and handling
- Map potential exposures of interest

Step 6: Additional studies Laboratory investigation of the water-supply system

- Provides strong evidence on the link between the source and cases
- Still possible to demonstrate that water is the source of an outbreak even if
 - the agent is not isolated from the water-supply system

Step 6: Additional studies Laboratory investigation of the water-supply system

- Increase frequency of sampling
- Increase the number of sampling sites
 - Suspected sources of pollution
 - Critical points in the treatment plant
 - Water and sediment from storage reservoirs and the distribuition system
 - Stored water

Step 6: Additional studies Laboratory investigation of the water-supply system

Microorganisms may not be detected in the water-supply system due to:

- Time between the contamination event, exposure and sampling.
- Transient contamination
- Disinfection of the system as a preliminary measure
- Special sampling needed to isolate enteric viruses or protozoa

Environmental investigation – Description of the water supply network

Under normal conditions, Reservoir X supplies Zone 6 (1,350 residents)

Before the outbreak, a valve opened from Reservoir X to ensure replacement of water in response to customer complaints about the water quality.

This led to a connection between zone 6 and zones 7 and 8 (3,558 residents) with drinking water from both Reservoir X and others

Consultations indicated a higher IR in these zones

The valve was closed on 6 June





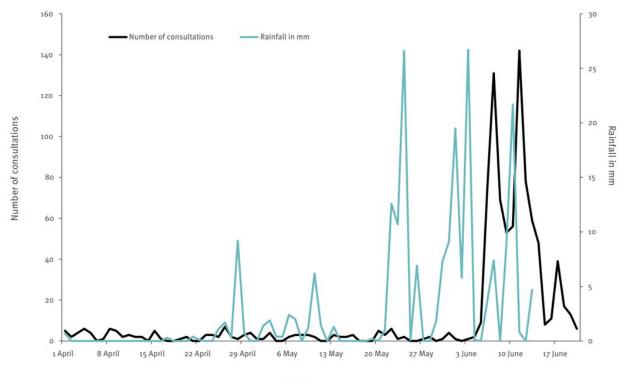
Environmental investigation – Visual inspection of Reservoir X

- Basin constructed as an unlined rock cavern. Its entrance sealed by a locked door
- 400 m³ of water, located above a residential area in mountainous terrain
- Natural cracks located in the back of the reservoir, leaks in the concrete construction and water running from inside the roof.
- Large antenna with power lines above the reservoir, were birds could gather
 - · Risk of bird faeces contaminating the area below
- No animals observed
- No unusual malfunctions reported before the outbreak

Environmental investigation – Weather records.

Weather data from a nearby weather station indicated heavy rainfall.

This coincided with registered consultations of gastroenteritis in the Norwegian Syndromic Surveillance System.



Date in 2019

Hyllestad et al. (2020): Large waterborne *Campylobacter* outbreak: use of multiple approaches to investigate contamination of the drinking water supply system, Norway, June 2019. Eurosurveillance, https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.35.2000011

Analysis of water in WSS-A or in Reservoir X.

- Routine samples prior to the outbreak did not detect any faecal indicator bacteria after the outbreak, extra sampling in WSS-A was conducted
- Routine samples for WSS-A on 3 June were also negative
- On 6 June, samples collected from Reservoir X and areas supplied by Reservoir X were contaminated.
- Several samples positive for *Campylobacter* (7 June).

Step 7: Generate hypotheses

Descriptive epidemiology

- Age
- Sex
- Residence
- Work place
- Routines

Microbiology

- Incubation period
- Mode of transmission
- Previous outbreaks

Environment

- Risk
 assessments
- Inspections

- **Analytical studies** may generate stronger evidence to support the hypothesis and to quantify the strength of the association
- Compare exposure between cases and non-cases and identify risk factors

Cohort studies
Case-control studies

Step 8: Analytical studies- Considerations

Challenges when collecting water usage exposure:

- Time elapsed between the exposure and the investigation
- Respondents may have changed water use as part of control measures
- Exposure to different water sources: home, workplace, sport center...
- Household members may be exposed to different water sources.

Step 8: Analytical studies- Considerations

Everyone is exposed to the same water source?

Measure Dose response Risk increases with increasing amounts of water

Step 8: Evaluate the hypotheses Assessing the strength of evidence

- A. Pathogen identified in clinical cases also found in water
- C. Evidence from an analytical (case-control or cohort) study demonstrates an association between water and illness

Strongly associated if (A+C) or (A+D) or (B+C); probably associated if (B+D) or C only or A only; possibly associated if B only or D only.

- B. Water quality failure and/or water-treatment problem of relevance, but outbreak pathogen is not detected in water
- D. Descriptive epidemiology suggests that the outbreak is water-related and excludes obvious alternative explanations

Source: Tillet et al

Cohort study of households

All residents who received water from WSS-A were included

Exposed: people in households receiving water from Reservoir X

Case definition: person with gastroenteritis with symptom onset

between

01 and 19 June 2019

Cohort study of households

SMS with link to a questionnaire sent to all households served by WSSA

One person should respond on behalf of all household members.

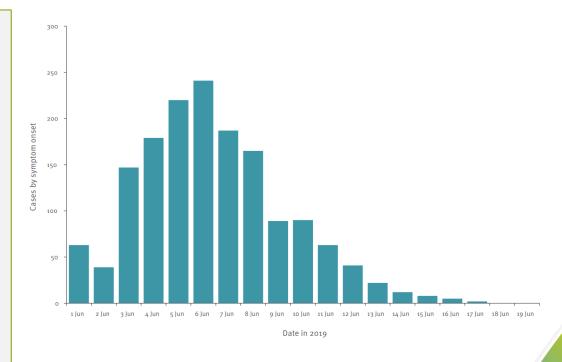
The questionnaire included items on illness and tap water consumption

Cohort study of households

- Information available from 2,526 persons who responded on behalf of 6,108 household members
- Coverage of 51% (6,108/11,995) of the residents supplied by WSSA

Cohort study of households

- Mean age: 34 years (0-93)
- 50% were female
- 1,573 respondents met the case definition
- Attack rate: 26%.
- Number of cases peaked on 6 June and decreased gradually thereafter



Hyllestad et al. (2020): Large waterborne *Campylobacter* outbreak: use of multiple approaches to investigate contamination of the drinking water supply system, Norway, June 2019. Eurosurveillance, https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.35.2000011

Cohort study of households

Attack rates and risk ratio for areas supplied by Reservoir X and other areas

Reservoir	Households	Individuals	Cases	Attack rate	Risk ratio (95% confidence interval)
Other reservoirs in WSS-A (zones 1–5)	1,653	4,098	481	12%	Reference
Reservoir X (zones 6-8)	873	2,010	1,092	54%	4.6 (4.2-5.0)

Cohort study of households

Risk of gastrointestinal illness by consumption of tap water

Daily tap water consumption	Individuals	Cases	Attack rate	Risk ratio (95% confidence interval)
o glasses	381	27	7%	Reference
1–3 glasses	2,562	586	23%	3.2 (2.2-4.7)
4-6 glasses	2,255	654	29%	4.1 (2.8-5.9)
≥7glasses	910	306	34%	4.7 (3.3-6.9)

Step 9: Implement control measures

- Implemented immediately
 - Boil water advisory
- Evaluated and adjusted continuously throughout the outbreak
- Control measures should also target the underlying causes of the outbreak
 - Insufficient policy or tools?
 - Inadequate training of waterworks personnel?
 - Inadequate maintenance of the water distribution system?
- The outbreak may prompt policy changes

Step 9: Implement control measures

Immediate precautionary control measures

- Boil water advice issued
- Reservoir X taken out of service
- Emergency water supply distribution from water tanks located in public areas
- Infection control measures in public services were strengthened

Important considerations

- The triangulation of epidemiological, genomic, geographical and water systems data was essential for confirming the role of Reservoir X
- Rationale for the early decisions was based on local knowledge and mapping of cases rather than epidemiological studies.
- The use of mixed methods allowed to identify contributing factors, such as inclement weather conditions.

Important considerations

- Water contamination through cracks in a mountain reservoir, because of heavy rainfall
- Water supply systems, in particular ageing infrastructure, are generally vulnerable to contamination especially as external risks such as climate factors are changing.
- Importance of conducting water safety planning, updating the infrastructure and performing risk-based surveillance to mitigate risks.

Step 10 Communicate findings, make recommendations

and evaluate the outbreak response

- Communication should begin early
 - · What is already known?
 - What is being done?
- Control measures should be communicated continuously to relevant stakeholders
- The public should receive regular updates
- Detailed outbreak report

Step 10

Communicate findings, make recommendations and evaluate the outbreak response

After-action review:

- Outbreak detection and alert
- Suitability and speed of implementation of control measures
- Outbreak reporting and communication
- What worked well
- What could be improved

References

- This module is based on the document: Surveillance and outbreak management of water-related infectious diseases associated with water-supply system. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
- The case study can be found at: Hyllestad et al, *Large waterborne Campylobacter outbreak: use of multiple approaches to investigate contamination of the drinking water supply system, Norway.* June 2019. Euro Surveill. 2020;25(35):pii=2000011. https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.35.2000011
- Additional references are:
 - European Centre for Disease control and prevention. *Toolkit for investigation and response to food and waterborne outbreaks with an EU dimension*. Available at: https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/toolkit-investigation-and-response-food-and-waterborne-disease-outbreaks-eu
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 - FEM wiki, European Centre for Disease control and prevention. Outbreak investigations https://wiki.ecdc.europa.eu/fem/Pages/Outbreak%20Investigations.aspx
 - Additional references were materials used in pilot national training workshops on water-related disease surveillance previously run by the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe under the framework of the Protocol of Water and Health and training materials from the the European Programme for Intervention Epidemiology Training (EPIET)

Acknowledgement

The training modules on water-related disease surveillance and outbreak management were developed within the programme of work of the WHO Regional Office for Europe and United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Protocol on Water and Health. Maureen O'Leary (Independent Consultant Epidemiologist, United Kingdom) and Bernardo Guzmán Herrador (Ministry of Health, Spain) prepared the presentations and manuals for the facilitator and participants. Enkhtsetseg Shinee (WHO European Centre for Environment and Health (ECEH), Germany) coordinated the process and provided conceptual input to content development of the training package under the strategic direction of Oliver Schmoll (WHO ECEH, Germany). WHO gratefully acknowledges the helpful feedback provided by Krešimir Čohar (Institute of Public Health, Croatia), Laura Huber (WHO Collaborating Centre for Research on Drinking-water Hygiene, German Environment Agency, Germany) and Susanne Hyllestad and Karin Nygård (Institute of Public Health, Norway) during the review process. Imre Sebestyén (Unitgraphics, Serbia) and Dennis Schmiege (WHO ECEH, Germany) prepared the design and layout, and administrative support was provided by Andrea Rhein (WHO ECEH, Germany). The WHO Regional Office for Europe and UNECE gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services.