

Outbreak Orange

Considering the Psychosocial in a Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

SIMTEC is a multi-year project, based at the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC), which will assist Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) personnel to consider psychosocial dimensions during an emergency. The project involves designing and conducting simulation exercises with complex disaster scenarios and specific inputs to elicit psychosocial responses from senior decision-makers in the EOC.

Outbreak Orange was the fourth in a series of tabletop simulation exercises. This exercise focused on EOCs and health EOCs and the development of protocols and procedures to manage a pandemic event.

Our intent was to examine the EOC members' ability to devise plans and make decisions that address the psychosocial need of the community and their colleagues.

METHODS

We developed and conducted a pandemic simulation tabletop exercise and invited individuals representing two local EOCs and two health EOCs to participate. The three-hour exercise was audio and video recorded. Transcripts of the exercise and follow-up focus groups were thematically analyzed using NVivo Data Analysis Software, in order to pull out the main challenges, psychosocial responses and concerns that can emerge during the initial confirmation of a pandemic.

RESULTS

During the data analysis process, we identified the following key themes:

- There is a need to address communications with health staff in a timely manner. With widespread social media availability, information and rumours will quickly spread and messaging needs to be positive and quick.
- News will quickly reach the community and messaging needs to be developed to handle growing concerns and fears.
- Protocols for police officers and public health staff need to be developed to address best practices for persons who refuse to be quarantined and how to manage their possessions.
- Health care organizations and first response organizations need to provide psychosocial support to their personnel during a disease outbreak.
- Ensuring that health care providers, first responders and receivers are physically safe is of major importance. Information on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be available quickly.



“Psychosocial” refers to the mental well-being of an individual and the role of relationships and community in impacting that person’s mental health.



DISCUSSION

Our findings highlight the fact that psychosocial concerns, when managing a pandemic, are not always top priority for those working in Community-based and Health EOCs. This is understandable, given the fact that training for EOC and Health EOC members most often focuses on the logistical and tactical aspects of an emergency and less on the psychological and social wellbeing of individuals and groups. Clearly, psychosocial training and education need to be integrated into EOC training and protocols, particularly when the physical health of a community is the priority during an emergency.

APPLICATION

Information collected from the exercises, focus groups, and Subject Matter Expert interviews throughout the research process assisted in the development of training materials and guidelines for psychosocial interventions by senior EOC personnel. Training EOC personnel to respond to the psychosocial consequences of disasters will reduce stress levels and enhance strategic and tactical decision-making. The exercises and training protocols are publicly-available through our online collaboratory. Further research in the area could include the following:

- Exploring the effectiveness of a range of psychosocial training initiatives with first responders in EOCs and health EOCs
- Examining the inclusion of a Team Support Worker in the Community-based or Health EOC

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Simulation and Training Exercise Collaboratory (SIMTEC) Project Team expresses its appreciation for the valuable feedback provided by the SIMTEC Expert Working Group, Subject Matter Experts, Exercise Players, researchers and other professionals in the creation and delivery of the Outbreak Orange Exercise.

Funding support for this project is provided both through substantial direct and in-kind financial contributions from project partners including the Canadian Safety and Security Program (CSSP), Centre for Security Science; Employee Assistance Services, Specialized Health Services Directorate RAPB/BRP Health Canada (EAS-HC); the Justice Institute of British Columbia; and Royal Roads University.