

Review article: Research methods in epidemiology, III**Epidemiology in search of infectious diseases: methods in outbreak investigation****S R PALMER***From the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (Welsh Unit), Cardiff Royal Infirmary, Newport Road, Cardiff CF2 1SZ, UK.*

The value of epidemiology in the investigation of incidents of infectious disease in the UK does not seem to be always readily appreciated within microbiology^{1,2} or environmental health.³ Yet because microbial disease is a result of the interaction of the agent, the host and environmental factors⁴ neither laboratory diagnosis nor environmental inspection are of themselves sufficient for successful investigation and control. Simply isolating microbes from the environment, even if appropriate samples are available, cannot distinguish between a reservoir of an agent and the outbreak source or cross contamination from the reservoir or source. Microbiologically plausible explanations of outbreaks may be wrong, but it is often difficult to persuade investigators of the need to test such hypotheses.

On the other hand, whilst epidemiology may have evolved from the study of infectious disease epidemics, academic epidemiology seems in the main to have passed infectious diseases by in the UK. This is regrettable as there is still the need to consolidate the foundations of a section of public health medicine which has refused to disappear.⁵ This review, in following the steps taken in an outbreak investigation,⁶ draws attention to both the usefulness of epidemiology and to regularly recurring methodological problems which may be encountered.

Describing the outbreak

The classical "shoe leather" approach to infectious disease incidents is the detailed investigation of individual cases in the light of the well established microbiological features of the particular infection and a confidence in the possible routes of transmission.⁷ The background incidence of infectious diseases in the UK, is usually well known and is sufficiently low not to require sophisticated statistical methods of cluster analysis⁸ to recognise a local

outbreak. However, with newly recognised infections or diseases presumed to be caused by an unknown infectious agent, surveys of disease incidence or laboratory isolation rates may be necessary to confirm that an outbreak has occurred. The methodological problems encountered are similar to those found in investigating clusters of cancers.⁸

The cases first reported in an outbreak are usually only a small and sometimes biased sample which may mislead, rendering control measures ineffective. Identification and definition of the exposed population is necessary to enable thorough case finding to be carried out. Paradoxically, however, a single case which does not fit the usual characteristics of time, place and person may provide the most valuable evidence of the source of infection.⁷

Data from cases are characterised by time, place and person.⁸ The epidemic curve, a plot of the number of cases over time of onset of illness, is the most useful and immediate means of assessing the type of outbreak. In point source outbreaks in which all cases are exposed at a given time, onset of symptoms of all primary cases will cluster within the range of the incubation period. For each organism there is a characteristic range within which infecting dose⁹ and portal of entry, as well as host factors¹⁰ (eg. age, immunosuppression) give rise to individual variability. In outbreaks propagated from person to person the occurrence of cases will be spread over several incubation periods with peaks at intervals of the incubation period. In larger community outbreaks of diseases spread by person to person the epidemic curve is usually smoother and the peaks at the generation time of the new cases less obvious. Despite their almost universal use in outbreak investigations, there has been little formal evaluation of their use in practice. Sartwell in 1950 established that the frequency distribution of incubation periods of infectious diseases of both long and short incubation

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Karin Nielsen-Saines



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