

REPORTING UNUSUAL PUBLIC HEALTH EVENTS: GUIDANCE FOR LABORATORIES

WHAT IS AN UNUSUAL EVENT?

Existing notifiable laboratory reporting criteria may not cover unusual events of public health concern.

A laboratory reportable unusual event could be any situation considered unusual by the microbiologist or laboratory worker related to:

- **Received samples:**
 - **frequency** (e.g., unexpected, unexplained, increase in the number of samples; for instance, many stool samples received with similar analytical request)
 - **circumstances of occurrence** (e.g., similar requests for analysis of samples from patients coming from various geographical locations within a limited time frame)
 - **clinical description** (e.g., samples from several patients with unclear but similar clinical picture within a limited time frame)
- **Test results:**
 - **unexpected number of the same:**
 - Species/subspecies
 - Strain type/subtype
 - Antimicrobial resistance pattern
 - **failure or uncertainty in diagnostics**
 - Unexpected failure in antimicrobial susceptibility testing

WHY REPORT AN UNUSUAL EVENT?

Microbiologists positioned at public health microbiology disciplines (e.g. diagnostics, clinical, veterinary, and environmental laboratories) are expected to identify, characterise and report on both common and uncommon microbiological findings.

Public health authorities and clinicians rely on microbiologists in order to detect, assess and respond to events of public health concern.

Microbiologists positioned within different laboratories, or disciplines, may observe events with multiple sources. In order to easily identify public health threats and provide a coordinated and timely response, compiled reports from microbiologists working at different sites are essential.

HOW TO REPORT AN UNUSUAL EVENT?

Contact the Public Health Authority

24 hours a day, 7 days a week at:

Phone: 123-456-7891

Fax: 123-456-7888

Email: report@report.com

Online: www.website.com

For updated information, please visit: www.website.com

There are no consequences for over-reporting. If you are unsure about whether or not to report, please report, regardless of whether an event is suspected or confirmed.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU REPORT AN UNUSUAL EVENT?

Mutual exchange of information between laboratories, the clinicians and the public health authorities is crucial for the decision-making process. Patient confidentiality will be maintained by public health authorities at all levels.

The public health authority will assess the event and its potential public health implications together with you and the clinicians based on criteria such as:

- The nature of the event (outbreak, epidemic or contamination)
- The nature of the disease (cause, time, place, source, chain of transmission, incubation period, diagnostics)
- Potential or risk for spread
- Preventability/treatment
- The overall impact of the event (severity, cost, public interest)

As part of the assessment, other partners such as hospitals, infectious disease specialists, local authorities, reference laboratories, food safety and water/environment authorities may be consulted.

The result of the mutual risk assessment might be:

- 1) Clinical case management without public health action.
- 2) Investigation (clinical, epidemiological, microbiological and/or environmental) that may or may not result in a public health intervention.

EXAMPLES OF EVENT REPORTING FROM LABORATORIES

The following examples from European countries illustrate the consequences of event reporting.

In many cases, prompt reporting from a laboratory has led to public health interventions:

“A Central Laboratory identified 6 strains of Salmonella bovismorbificans, a rare serotype in this country. On the basis of this notification, a multidisciplinary outbreak investigation was conducted. Through international collaboration it was discovered that the strains from all 6 cases were identical to the strain connected to an outbreak in a neighbouring country earlier the same year.”

In other cases, delays in reporting events have complicated the public health response:

“A marked increase in the number of stool samples in a regional laboratory was not reported. This delayed detection and response to a Giardiasis outbreak in a non-endemic country”.