

TARRANT

The Alberta Recording and Research Network
Tracking Influenza in Alberta



NEWSLETTER April 2006

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At the Tarrant Meeting 2006

Dear colleagues,

TARRANT Annual Meeting Highlights

TARRANT hosted the annual meeting this year on March 10 in Calgary. Forty people including 10 sentinels and their staff attended the meeting.

Again, the major focus of this meeting was influenza

surveillance. Presenters included senior personnel from Alberta Health and Wellness, Alberta Provincial Laboratory, as well as the British Columbia Center for Disease Control (BCCDC).

Dr. Kevin Fonseca, a virologist of the Provincial Lab, gave the attendees an update of the lab tests. The Provincial Lab has now switched from cell culture to molecular technology for routine respiratory virus tests. Compared to rapid culture methods, molecular assays do not require viable viruses. This may change how sentinels store and transport their swabs: samples can be stored at room temperature and requirement on transportation temperature can be less strict. Molecular assays are also much more sensitive. Influenza positive rate for those samples submitted by TARRANT sentinels this season was 29.5% compared to 17.7% in 2004-2005, when rapid culture methods were used. Dr. Fonseca believed this could be largely explained by the implementation of the more sensitive molecular assay.

Elaine Sartison and Larry Svenson from Alberta Health and Wellness introduced influenza surveillance system in Alberta. Weekly reports from TARRANT sentinels, virological results from provincial lab, school absenteeism reports, and outbreak reports compose an efficient surveillance system in Alberta. Using billing data to monitor influenza related health care utilization (e.g. GP



Dr. Hagens and Dr. Fonseca

office visits, emergency department visits) may have some advantages, such as coverage of most physicians in Alberta and the potential of expanding to include other disorders, with no extra workload for physicians. However, interpretation of these data can be challenging.

Dr. Karen Grimsrud, Deputy Provincial Health Officer in Alberta, presented Alberta's plan for pandemic influenza, a "public health emergency that is inevitable but unpredictable in timing and epidemiology." The Alberta plan covers six key areas: surveillance, vaccine and antiviral medication, health services, communications, public health measures, and municipal and emergency preparedness. Her presentation

generated discussions about sentinels/family physicians' roles during a pandemic public health crisis. There are still geographic gaps to fill in for the TARRANT sentinel network. Although majority of Canadians (86%) say that it's important that they are able to turn to their family doctor when faced with a public health crisis, only 20% of family physicians feel the supports are in place to handle such an emergency¹. Some attendees felt that these issues must be resolved to prepare for the influenza pandemic. The Alberta Pandemic Influenza Contingency Plan Draft 2002 is available online:

<http://www.health.gov.ab.ca/influenza/PandemicPlan.html>.

Cindy Marsaro, the research coordinator from BCCDC introduced a study assessing vaccine effectiveness (VE) using their sentinel surveillance network. Assessing influenza vaccine effectiveness is critical but very challenging due to the variation of circulating influenza viruses and vaccine from year to year. Cindy's presentation demonstrated that a sentinel network is a feasible way to monitor effectiveness of influenza vaccine annually. The results of this study were published in Canada Communicable Disease Report last September². Most attendees agreed that VE is an important issue, and were very excited to see the possibility of establishing a system to evaluate VE on an annual basis. TARRANT is working with Alberta Health to develop a proposal using our sentinel network to assess VE. The study is expected to start in late fall 2006. We will keep you informed of the process.



Kanti Pabbaraju, Sallene Wong, Dr. Julie Fox, Vinod Khurana and Tom Stowe.



Carol Inglis and Dr. Inglis

Feedback from attendees was very positive. They considered the meeting to be very informative. Some suggested we could do better next year by inviting some of you to talk about the challenges of working as a sentinel. Recruiting more sentinels and keeping existing sentinels interested are always challenging. Fortunately, several attendees provided us a few names of physicians that may be interested in participating in the TARRANT program. We will follow up with them and hope to recruit some new blood for TARRANT.

Most presentations will be posted on the TARRANT website. (www.ucalgary.ca/tarrant) If you do not have access to the internet or prefer to receive a paper copy of the presentations, please contact Lucie Vlach @ (403) 220-2750 or vlach@ucalgary.ca

¹ The College of Family Physicians of Canada. (2005). The role of the family doctor in public health and emergency preparedness. A discussion paper. http://www.cfpc.ca/local/files/communications/role_fam_doc_dec05.pdf

² Skowronski DM, Gilbert M, Tweed Sa, Petric M, McNabb G, De Serres G. Effectiveness of vaccine against medical consultation due to laboratory-confirmed influenza: results from a sentinel physician pilot project in British Columbia, 2004-2005. Canada Communicable Disease Report. 2005; 31(18): 181-91. <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/ccdr-rmtc/05vol31/dr3118ea.html>