Reviewer's report

Title: An Evaluation of Reporting Timeliness of Public Health Surveillance Systems for Infectious Diseases

Version: 1 Date: 6 April 2004

Reviewer: Nkuchia M. M'ikanatha

Reviewer's report:

General

The topic addressed here is important and the authors have identified key data sources. But the rationale for either multi-state outbreaks instead of any outbreak or the significance of "one or two incubation periods." is unclear. While multi-state outbreaks differ from localized outbreaks, both types are important, and are acted upon at the national level.

I agree with the authors that standardized reporting of timelines could facilitate detection of multi-state outbreaks but these conclusions should be easily linked to the results and interpretation of their data.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

The authors should give the rationale for focusing on multi-state outbreaks as well as reasons for their choice of both published reports and NNDSS data.

While the authors provide the method they used to search for papers, the number of papers they found is missing in the results. The search key words combinations used could also help readers of this paper.

What is the rationale for using incubation period and for selection of 30 days in the case of hepatitis A?

Data presented on page 8 second paragraph beginning with "A total 72,293 (26.4%)." belong to the results.

The comment on page 12 second paragraph starting with "In general, for the same data type..." belongs to discussion.

On page 13 under discussion, the statement starting with "Public health programs conducting surveillance should..." is a recommendation that should either be restated or deleted.

The recommendation starting on the first paragraph of page 14 should be reexamined to ensure that it is within the scope of the current paper.

On page 15, second paragraph sentence starting with “Acute hepatitis A surveillance data…” should be revised or deleted. Aberration detection methods raise flags but they do not detect outbreaks,
which must be done through verification of data and case follow-up.

While Effler et al. (Ref 18) demonstrated improvement of timeliness of cases reported to Hawaii Health Department, their cannot support the interpretation given on page 16 paragraphs 2.

The conclusions given on page 19 should be more focused to the results and interpretation of the data in the current paper.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

In the abstract under conclusion delete "to" before helpful

Background needs to be reduced

Under methods second paragraph the sentence beginning with "Studies without." can be deleted either inclusion or exclusion criteria would be adequate.

Under acknowledgement, it is important to mention the NNDSS reporting health jurisdiction or mention the 50 states, New York City and Washington DC).

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No