Reviewer's report

Title: Management of environmental health issues for the 2004 Athens Olympic Games: is enhanced integrated environmental health surveillance needed in every day operation?

Version: 1 Date: 9 August 2006

Reviewer: Denis Zmirou-Navier

Reviewer's report:

General
This paper describes with some detail the environmental health (EH) inspection and surveillance system that was built for the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, and draws upon this experience to suggest some lines of action for EH surveillance in less exceptional situations.

The topic covered by this paper is of public health interest and the experience that is described is valuable for those who are, or will be, in charge of designing and conducting EH surveillance systems for similar mass gathering events (such as world fairs, continental or world wide sports meetings and alike). However, as it stands, the paper falls short of providing the information that would make it usable, especially as regards learning that can be drawn from this experience to design and conduct EH surveillance in routine situations. It could be improved in many ways; some are suggested hereafter.

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

- The title is not self-evident. Does it relate to extension of the enhanced integrated surveillance to routine surveillance, beyond mass events such as Olympic Games, as the conclusion of the summary and of the main paper would suggest? Is it a question relating to the Olympics and similar mass events themselves?
- The summary, although long, is unclear and too general so that the hastily reader might miss the message. For instance, authors might want to specify that “water quality monitoring” deals with drinking and recreational water; also, listing some types of facilities that were inspected might give the reader a clearer view on what the paper is about. It is important that the time frame of the project be specified in the results section, in reference to the timing of the Games. Finally, whether the summary conveys the information that justifies its conclusion (i.e. such an EH surveillance system is applicable also in more routine circumstances) is unclear.
- The background section suggests that “modern urban lifestyle” resembles the situation of mass gathering “such as Olympic Games, and consequently, public health (including EH) measures taken in the later circumstances are valuable also in the former. Because this seems to be the important message the authors want to convey, this short statement warrants development and justification. A more thorough review of the literature would be useful to add convincing evidence. This holds true also in the discussion section.
- Similarly, one may regret, as a general comment that too few references are given to mass events other than Olympic Games. Now, the situation described by the authors and its learning extend to other situations such as world fairs, other sports events (football cups, world athletic championships) that have been documented in the literature.
- Methods section. The “Evaluation” sub-section is overly vague. It lacks specifics about the criteria and parameters that the Olympic planning unit has used to evaluate the programme and its components. This piece of information would be very interesting to those who would have to design similar surveillance systems.
- Discussion section. The key message of the authors warrant additional arguments (including extended literature references). Several times, one finds the idea that similar integrated EH surveillance is also needed on a routine basis, “but with a different perspective”. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the important resources that need to be mobilized to implement such an EH system would be allocated on a routine basis by national authorities, after the mass or political events that justified them. The authors might therefore want to go beyond their general statement and discuss, among other issues, how, based on their experience, one could prioritize the components of the system they successfully set with intense (but transitory) input from national authorities, or how one could maintain a similar but less intensive surveillance system: what is essential, what could be slackened etc?
Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

- Methods section. The end of the first paragraph is unclear. One does not understand whether food hygiene is included or not in the surveillance system. In the “water quality surveillance program” sub-section, the reader might want to know which are the threshold concentrations for the different micro-organisms that were monitored, that would label a sample as “positive”. Not everybody is familiar with European Union water quality regulations and WHO guidelines, and this information would facilitate interpretation of the results section. In the “Vessel sanitation” sub-section, the first occurrence of VSP should explicit what this acronym stands for.
- Discussion section. The reasons why the proportion of “positive” microbiological tests increased during the last two months before the Games is unclear. The corresponding sentences (p 15) are somehow clumsy.
- Figures 2, 3 and 4 exhibit different time frames (100 days, 160 or 300 days before the end of the Olympics. Why?

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

- While authors claim that the EH surveillance system was a success, it is said p 17 that about 12.7% of all premises of public health interest were inspected. Is this a high figure? Some comments would be of interest.

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

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests