Reviewer's report

Title: Designing and Conducting Tabletop Exercises to Assess Public Health Preparedness

Version: 1  Date:  31 October 2006

Reviewer: Daniel Barnett

Reviewer's report:

The paper is well-written, but its inherent methodological limitations impede a meaningful interpretation of its findings. As the authors appropriately acknowledge, the tabletop exercises employed a variety of delivery formats, scenarios, and objectives; this use of different instruments and metrics poses a barrier to definitive interagency comparisons. The health department sites were not randomly selected, and the sample may be biased toward health departments with larger budgets that can afford to bring in outside consultants to coordinate tabletop exercises. As no health department was exercised more than once, improvements in public health performance over time cannot be truly ascertained.

The study does not address the potential influences that external events may have had on health departments' performance during the 2003-2006 time window (e.g., Hurricane Katrina in 2005). The proposed recommendations about conducting tabletop exercises, while reasonable and well-described, are not particularly novel. Finally, the paper does not offer evidence-based support for its conclusion that "tabletop exercises...should involve external exercise developers". (p. 11) This statement has important implications for resource-strapped local health departments whose budgets may be unable to accommodate the hiring of outside expertise for tabletop exercise design and evaluation.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
- More detailed description/examples of the actual tabletop instruments used, along with a timeline for administration of specific tabletops at specific health departments.
- Expanded background literature review on tabletop exercises in particular.
- Discussion of the role that external events (e.g., Hurricane Katrina) may have had during the study interval.
- More detailed demographic description of the health department exercise sites.
- Evidence-based justification/clarification of conclusion that "tabletop exercises...should involve external exercise developers" (p. 11)
- Additional references from peer reviewed literature to support the observations about changes in public health preparedness during the interval studied.
- Assessment of demographic representativeness of exercised health departments in the study, with respect to local and state health departments across the U.S.

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

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
N/A

What next?: Reject because scientifically unsound

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.