

Sharing of public health information in response to maritime outbreaks – report from an exercise conducted at a European level

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Background:

Inter-country communication and structured information flow is of major importance in outbreak management potentially affecting more than one country, particularly in case of a public health event of international concern. Though there are established communication systems in European Member States (MS), public health events in the maritime sector challenge authorities and stakeholders.

Methods:

Guidelines for inter-country communication developed by the joint action were tested via a 1-day web-based multi-sectorial, discussion-based table-top exercise (TTE) for ports at European level. Two outbreak scenarios (gastroenteritis and COVID-19) on passenger ships in separate regions (Mediterranean, North Sea) were acted out consecutively.

Results:

Thirty participants and 63 observers from 20 MS, cruise ships, international and European institutions took part in the TTE. The TTE identified two different information flows: (1) authorities at local level implementing public health measures on ships share information with the next and previous ports of call, either directly or via national level authorities using different platforms depending on the event without clearly predefined criteria and (2) the ship captain sends health information to the next port of call (via the National Single Window or Email or Telephone or other means). Relying on communication via emails and telephones however, has limitations: a) limited access, b) no central data storage, c) historical data unavailable. Lack of communication channels for feedback to the ship and of coordinating and closing an event was evident.

Conclusions:

A successfully conducted European TTE in maritime outbreak scenarios identified lack of clear international communication as communication channels were not always clear and depend on local/national conditions. There is potential for improving international communication. Guidelines for inter-country communication in this setting may help enhance communication practice.