

Surveillance systems reported in *Communicable Diseases Intelligence*, 2005

This article describes the surveillance schemes that are routinely reported on in *Communicable Diseases Intelligence (CDI)*.

In Australia, communicable diseases surveillance systems exist at national, state and local levels. State and local surveillance systems are crucial to the timely and effective detection and management of outbreaks and in assisting in the effective implementation of national policies. The national surveillance system combines some of the data collected from state and territory-based systems to provide an overview at a national level. Specific functions of the national surveillance system include: detection and management of outbreaks affecting more than one jurisdiction; monitoring of the need for and impact of national control programs; guidance of national policy development and resource allocation; and description of the epidemiology of rare diseases for which there are only a few notifications in each jurisdiction. National surveillance also assists in quarantine activities and facilitates international collaborations such as reporting to the World Health Organization.

Surveillance has been defined by the World Health Organization as the 'continuing scrutiny of all aspects of the occurrence and spread of disease that are pertinent to effective control'. It is characterised by 'methods distinguished by their practicability, uniformity, and frequently by their rapidity, rather than complete accuracy'.¹ Although some surveillance schemes aim for complete case ascertainment, others include only a proportion of all cases of the conditions under surveillance, and these samples are subject to systematic and other biases. Results generated from surveillance schemes must be interpreted with caution, particularly when comparing results between schemes, between different geographical areas or jurisdictions and over time. Surveillance data may also differ from data on communicable diseases gathered in other settings.

The major features of the surveillance schemes for which *CDI* publishes regular reports are described below.

Other surveillance schemes for which *CDI* publishes annual reports include tuberculosis notifications (*Commun Dis Intell* 2004;28:464–473), the Australian Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory Network (*Commun Dis Intell* 2004;28:474–480), invasive pneumococcal notifications (*Commun Dis Intell* 2004;28:441–454) and laboratory surveillance

(*Commun Dis Intell* 2004;28:455–464), and the Australian Rotavirus Surveillance Program (*Commun Dis Intell* 2004;28:481–484).

National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System

National compilations of notifiable diseases have been published intermittently in a number of publications since 1917.² The National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System (NNDSS) was established in 1990 under the auspices of the Communicable Diseases Network Australia (CDNA).

The system coordinates the national surveillance of more than 60 communicable diseases or disease groups endorsed by the CDNA. Under this scheme, notifications are made from doctors and laboratories to state or territory health authorities under the provisions of the public health legislation in their jurisdiction. Computerised, de-identified unit records of notifications are supplied to the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing for collation, analysis and reporting in *CDI*.

Data provided for each notification include a unique record reference number, state or territory, disease code, date of onset, date of notification to the relevant health authority, sex, age, Indigenous status and postcode of residence. Additional data now being collected includes infecting organism and subtype, the diagnosis method, full details of vaccination where appropriate, resident location as defined in the National Localities Index, dates of onset, specimen collection, notification and date when notification was received by health authorities, indigenous status defined as per the Australian Bureau of Statistic's format, outbreak reference number, how the case was found, whether the case was confirmed, and whether the case was imported from overseas.

Aggregated data are presented on the *Communicable Diseases Australia* Internet site every fortnight (www.health.gov.au/cda). Data are published in *CDI* every quarter and in an annual report. The reports include numbers of notifications for each disease by state or territory, and totals for Australia for the current period, the year to date, and for the corresponding period of the previous year. The national total for each disease is compared with the average number of notifications over the previous five years in the same period. A commentary on the notification data

is included with the tables in each issue of *CDI* and graphs are used to illustrate important aspects of the data.

HIV infection and AIDS notifications are not included in this section of *CDI*. Surveillance for these conditions is conducted separately by the National Centre for HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research and is reported in the HIV and AIDS surveillance reports (see below).

Australian Sentinel Practice Research Network

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and the Department of General Practice at the University of Adelaide operate the Australian Sentinel Practice Research Network (ASPREN). ASPREN is a national network of general practitioners who report presentations of defined medical conditions each week. The aim of ASPREN is to provide an indicator of the burden of disease in the primary health care setting and to detect trends in consultation rates.

There are currently about 40 general practitioners participating in the network from most states. Seventy-five per cent of these are in metropolitan areas and the remainder are rural. Between 3,000 and 4,000 consultations are recorded each week.

The list of conditions is reviewed annually by the ASPREN Director and an annual report is published. In 2005, six conditions are being monitored; four are related to communicable disease issues. These include influenza, gastroenteritis, varicella and shingles. Data for communicable diseases are published in *CDI* every quarter. Data are presented in graphic format as the rate of reporting per 1,000 consultations per week. The conditions are defined as follows:

Influenza

There are two definitions for influenza in 2005. A patient may be coded once or twice depending on their symptoms. The definition for influenza 1 will include more individuals.

Influenza 1

Must have the following: cough, fatigue and fever. (Note there is no time frame to these symptoms).

Influenza 2

- (a) Viral culture or serological evidence of influenza virus infection; or
- (b) influenza epidemic, plus four of the criteria in (c); or

(c) six of the following:

1. sudden onset (within 12 hours);
2. cough;
3. rigors or chills;
4. fever;
5. prostration and weakness;
6. myalgia, widespread aches and pains;
7. no significant respiratory physical signs other than redness of nasal mucous membrane and throat;
8. influenza in close contacts.

Gastroenteritis

Intestinal disease – presumed or proven to be infective in origin.

Varicella/chickenpox

Any consultation at which varicella/chickenpox is diagnosed on clinical or other grounds.

Shingles

Any consultation at which shingles is diagnosed on clinical or other grounds.

HIV and AIDS surveillance

National surveillance for HIV and AIDS is coordinated by the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research (NCHECR), in collaboration with state and territory health authorities, the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and other collaborating networks in surveillance for HIV/AIDS.

Cases of HIV infection are notified to the National HIV Database on the first occasion of diagnosis in Australia, either by the diagnosing laboratory (Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania), by doctor notification (Western Australia) or by a combination of laboratory and doctor sources (New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria). Cases of AIDS are notified through the state and territory health authorities to the National AIDS Registry. Diagnoses of both HIV infection and AIDS are notified with the person's date of birth and name code, to minimise duplicate notifications while maintaining confidentiality.

Currently, two tables presenting the number of new diagnoses of HIV infection, AIDS and deaths following AIDS are published in each issue of *CDI*. The tabulations are based on data available three

months after the end of the reporting period, to allow for reporting delay and to incorporate newly available information.

Each year from 1997, the NCHECR has published the *HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in Australia Annual Surveillance Report*. The annual surveillance report, available from <http://www.med.unsw.edu.au/nchechr/>, provides a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of surveillance data on HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in Australia.

National Influenza Surveillance Scheme

Influenza surveillance in Australia is based on several schemes collecting a range of data that can be used to measure influenza activity.

- Since 2001, laboratory-confirmed influenza has been a notifiable disease in all Australian states and territories (except the Australian Capital Territory and South Australia) and reported in the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System (see above).
- In 2005, five sentinel general practitioner schemes contribute reports of influenza-like illness: the Australian Sentinel Practice Research Network, the Tropical Influenza Surveillance from the Northern Territory, the New South Wales Sentinel General Practice Scheme, the Victorian Sentinel General Practice Scheme and Western Australian sentinel general practices.
- The Virology and Serology Laboratory Reporting Scheme laboratory reports of influenza diagnoses including virus type.

The results of each of the schemes are published together fortnightly throughout the year on the *Communicable Diseases Australia* Website as the National Influenza Surveillance Scheme.

Annual reports on influenza in Australia are published in *CDI* each year (*Commun Dis Intell* 2004; 28:160–168). These reports include the above data as well as absenteeism data from a major national employer, hospitalisation and mortality data and influenza typing data from the WHO Collaborating Centre for Influenza Reference and Research.

Sentinel Chicken Surveillance Program

The Sentinel Chicken Surveillance Program is used to provide an early warning of increased flavivirus activity in Australia. The main viruses of concern are Murray Valley encephalitis (MVEV) and Kunjin viruses. MVEV causes the disease Murray Valley encephalitis (formerly known as Australian encephalitis), a potentially fatal disease in humans.

Encephalitis is less frequent in cases of Kunjin virus infection and these encephalitis cases have a lower rate of severe sequelae.

These viruses are enzootic in parts of the north-east Kimberley region of Western Australia and the Top End of the Northern Territory but are epizootic in other areas of the Kimberley, Pilbara, Gascoyne Murchison and Mid-west regions of Western Australia, in north Queensland and in Central Australia. MVEV is also responsible for occasional epidemics of encephalitis in eastern Australia. The most recent was in 1974 when there were 13 fatalities and cases were reported from all mainland states. Since then, 72 clinical cases of MVEV have been reported, 63 from the north of Australia and nine from Central Australia. Since 1974 there have been 20 cases of Kunjin virus reported.

Since 1974, a number of sentinel chicken flocks have been established in Australia to provide an early warning of increased MVEV activity. These programs are supported by individual state health departments. Each State has a contingency plan which will be implemented if one or more chickens in a flock seroconverts to MVEV.

Currently, 30 flocks are maintained in the north of Western Australia, nine in the Northern Territory, seven in New South Wales and 10 in Victoria. There are no flocks in Northern Queensland in 2004–05. The flocks in Western Australia and the Northern Territory are tested all year round but those in New South Wales and Victoria are tested only in the summer months, during the main MVEV risk season. Results will be posted on the National Arbovirus Surveillance Website by state representatives. A yearly summary is presented in *CDI*.

Australian Gonococcal Surveillance Programme

The Australian Gonococcal Surveillance Programme (AGSP) is a continuing program to monitor antimicrobial resistance in *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* and includes the reference laboratories in all states and territories. These laboratories report data on sensitivity to an agreed core group of antimicrobial agents on a quarterly basis and provide an expanded analysis as an annual report in *CDI* (*Commun Dis Intell* 2004;28:187). The antibiotics which are currently routinely surveyed are the penicillins, ceftriaxone, ciprofloxacin and spectinomycin, all of which are administered as single dose regimens. One main purpose of the AGSP is to help define standard protocols for antibiotic treatment of gonococcal infection. When *in vitro* resistance to a recommended agent is demonstrated in five per cent or more of isolates, it is usual to reconsider the inclusion of that agent in current treatment schedules. Additional data are

also provided on other antibiotics from time to time. At present all laboratories also test isolates for the presence of high level resistance to the tetracyclines and intermittent surveys of azithromycin resistance are conducted. Comparability of data is achieved by means of a standardised system of MIC testing and a program-specific quality assurance process.

Australian Meningococcal Surveillance Programme

The reference laboratories of the Australian Meningococcal Surveillance Programme report data of laboratory-confirmed cases confirmed either by culture or by non-culture techniques. Culture-positive cases where a *Neisseria meningitidis* is grown from a normally sterile site or skin, and non-culture based diagnoses, derived from results of nucleic acid amplification assays and serological techniques are defined as invasive meningococcal disease (IMD) according to Public Health Laboratory Network definitions.

Data is reported annually and quarterly in *CDI*. Data in the quarterly reports are restricted to a description of the number of cases per jurisdiction, and serogroup where known. A full analysis of laboratory-confirmed cases of IMD, including phenotyping and antibiotic susceptibility data are published annually (*Commun Dis Intell* 2004;28:194–206).

Virology and Serology Laboratory Reporting Scheme

The Virology and Serology Laboratory Reporting Scheme (LabVISE) began operating in 1977. The scheme currently comprises 17 laboratories from all states and the Australian Capital Territory. Contributors submit data fortnightly on the laboratory identification of viruses and other organisms. Each record includes mandatory data fields (laboratory, specimen collection date, a patient identifier code, and organism), and optional fields (patient's sex, date of birth or age, postcode of residence, specimen source, clinical diagnosis, and the method of diagnosis). Reports are collated, analysed and published quarterly in *CDI*. Each report includes summary tables of total numbers of organisms identified by state or territory and numbers of reports by month and participating laboratory. Monthly updates of LabVISE data are also published on the *Communicable Diseases Australia* website.

LabVISE data should be interpreted with caution. The number and type of reports received is subject to a number of biases. These include the number of participating laboratories, which has varied over time. The locations of participating laboratories also create bias, as some jurisdictions are better

represented than others. Also changes in diagnostic practices, particularly the introduction of new testing methodologies, may affect laboratory reports. The ability of laboratory tests to distinguish acute from chronic or past infection must also be considered in interpretation of the data. Although changes in incidence cannot be determined with precision from this data, general trends can be observed, for example with respect to seasonality and the age-sex distribution of patients. See review in *Commun Dis Intell* 2002;26:323–374).

Australian Paediatric Surveillance Unit

The Australian Paediatric Surveillance Unit (APSU) conducts national, active surveillance of uncommon conditions of childhood, including infectious, genetic, mental health, and vaccine preventable diseases and childhood injuries. Communicable diseases currently under surveillance through the APSU include: acute flaccid paralysis; congenital cytomegalovirus infection; congenital rubella; HIV infection; AIDS and perinatal exposure to HIV; neonatal herpes simplex virus infection; and hepatitis C virus infection.

The primary objectives of the APSU are to document the number of Australian children under 15 years, newly diagnosed with specified conditions, their geographic distribution, clinical features, current management and outcome. Contributors to the APSU are clinicians known to be working in paediatrics and child health in Australia. In 2002, over 1,000 clinicians participated in the surveillance of 14 conditions through the APSU, with an overall monthly response rate of 96 per cent. APSU is a unit of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, funded by the Department of Health and Ageing and the Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney. For further information please contact the APSU Director, Associate Professor Elizabeth Elliott on telephone: +61 2 9845 2200, facsimile +61 2 9845 3005 or email: apsu@chw.edu.au

National Enteric Pathogens Surveillance System

Since 1980, the National Enteric Pathogens Surveillance System (NEPSS) has collected, analysed and disseminated data on human enteric bacterial infections diagnosed in Australia. These pathogens include *Salmonella*, *Escherichia coli*, *Vibrio*, *Yersinia*, *Plesiomonas*, *Aeromonas* and *Campylobacter*.

Communicable Diseases Intelligence NEPSS quarterly reports include only *Salmonella*. Data are based on reports to NEPSS from Australian laboratories of laboratory-confirmed human infection with *Salmonella*. *Salmonella* are identified by

reference laboratories to the level of serovar and, if applicable, phage-type. Infections apparently acquired overseas are included. Multiple isolations of a single *Salmonella* serovar/phage-type from one or more body sites during the same episode of illness are counted once only. The date of the case is the date the primary diagnostic laboratory isolated a *Salmonella* from the clinical sample.

Communicable Diseases Intelligence NEPSS quarterly reports include historical quarterly mean counts. These should be interpreted cautiously, as they may be affected by outbreaks and by surveillance artefacts such as newly recognised and incompletely typed *Salmonella*.

NEPSS is operated by the Microbiological Diagnostic Unit — Public Health Laboratory, Department of Microbiology and Immunology, University of Melbourne; and is overseen by a Steering Committee of state, territory and commonwealth stakeholders. Contact NEPSS at Microbiological Diagnostic Unit, or by telephone +61 3 8344 5701, facsimile +61 3 8344 7833 or email joanp@unimelb.edu.au

Scientists, diagnostic and reference laboratories contribute data to NEPSS, which is supported by state and territory health departments and the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

Australian Childhood Immunisation Register

Accurate information on the immunisation status of children is needed at the community level for program management and targeted immunisation efforts. A population-based immunisation register can provide this need. The Australian Childhood Immunisation Register (ACIR) commenced operation on 1 January 1996 and is now an important component of the *Immunise Australia Program*. It is administered and operated by the Health Insurance Commission (HIC). The Register was established by transferring data on all children under the age of seven years enrolled with Medicare from the HIC to the ACIR. This constitutes a nearly complete population register, as approximately 99 per cent of children are registered with Medicare by 12 months of age. Children who are not enrolled in Medicare are added to the Register when a recognised immunisation provider supplies details of an eligible immunisation. Immunisations are generally notified to the HIC either by electronic means, the Internet or by paper ACIR notification forms. Immunisations recorded on the Register must have been given in accordance with the guidelines for immunisation determined by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

From the data finally entered onto the ACIR, the HIC provides regular quarterly coverage reports at the national and state level. Coverage for these reports is calculated using the cohort method described in *Commun Dis Intell* 1998;22:36–37. With this method, a cohort of children is defined by date of birth in three-month groups. This birth cohort has the immunisation status of its members assessed at the three key milestones of 12 months, 24 months and 6 years of age. Analysis of coverage is undertaken three months after the due date for completion of each milestone, so that time is available for processing notifications and the impact on coverage estimates of delayed notification to the ACIR is minimised. Only children enrolled with Medicare are included in order to minimise inaccuracies in coverage estimates due to duplicate records.

The HIC coverage reports for the three milestones are published in *CDI* every quarter. Coverage estimates are provided for each state and territory and Australia as a whole and for each individual vaccine assessed at each milestone. Changes in 'fully immunised' coverage from the previous quarter are also included in the tables.

A commentary on ACIR immunisation coverage estimates is included with the tables in each issue and graphs are used to provide trends in immunisation coverage.

OzFoodNet: enhanced foodborne disease surveillance

The Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing established the OzFoodNet network in 2000 to collaborate nationally in the investigation of foodborne disease. OzFoodNet conducts studies on the burden of illness and coordinates national investigations into outbreaks of foodborne disease.

OzFoodNet reports quarterly on investigations of gastroenteritis outbreaks and clusters of disease potentially related to food. Annual reports have been produced and published in *CDI* since 2002. Data are reported from all Australian jurisdictions.

References

1. Last JM. A dictionary of epidemiology. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
2. Hall R. Notifiable diseases surveillance, 1917 to 1991. *Commun Dis Intell* 1993;226–236.