

## Alameda County shines in study on contagious disease response

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**(01-02) 13:19 PST SAN FRANCISCO** -- Most public health departments are not meeting U.S. guidelines for quickly handling cases of contagious diseases, and a good number are ignoring phone calls from doctors reporting possible outbreaks, according to a national study published Wednesday.

The good news is that at least one Bay Area agency - the Alameda County Public Health Department - was a top performer in the study.

The San Francisco Department of Public Health, which was not part of the study, relies on a reporting system that researchers say is ideal.

"You can't have delays," said Dr. Muntu Davis, head of the division of communicable disease control and prevention for Alameda County. "If you're talking about disease reporting, a lot of times it's time sensitive, and you want to jump on it and get as much information as soon as possible so you implement correct disease control measures."

The Rand Corp. study tested the disease-reporting systems at 74 public health departments selected at random. Researchers found that two-thirds of health departments they surveyed did not return phone calls from doctors reporting possible outbreaks within the 30-minute window recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But more disturbing is that nearly 40 percent of the health departments never returned at least one phone call from a doctor reporting a possible outbreak.

"Local public health agencies are basically the first line of defense in an emergency. The public rightfully expects their health department will be there for them, and the first thing is to pick up the phone and respond to an emergency," said David Dausey, an associate policy researcher for Rand and lead author of the study, which is being published Wednesday in the American Journal of Public Health.

"We found that that doesn't happen, or doesn't happen with the frequency and regularity that we would hope," he said.

The Alameda County Public Health Department, which was involved in the survey, was one of only five agencies that received the highest score for promptly returning phone calls from doctors reporting cases of infectious diseases.

In every community, doctors are instructed to call their local public health department with suspected outbreaks of everything from the norovirus and E. coli infections to smallpox. According to CDC guidelines, a public health expert, usually a doctor who specializes in communicable diseases, is supposed to call back and follow up on the report within 30 minutes.

The guidelines are not strictly enforced by the CDC or any other government health agency, and the Rand study is the first to look at whether public health departments are meeting the national standards on their own.

The system is set up so that outbreaks of infectious diseases can be caught quickly and halted before they spread to the general public. In emergencies, doctors could be reporting incidents of bioterrorism - such as an anthrax outbreak - or diseases like meningitis that could pose a significant health risk to the general public.

In the Bay Area, public health officials said they field reports from doctors every day. Most of the reports aren't urgent cases that need immediate public health intervention, but are required by state or federal law to be reported. The departments also hear from school nurses or even the general public reporting cases of contagious diseases like tuberculosis.

In the Rand study, researchers posing as doctors called the 74 health departments to report an urgent case that needed to be discussed with a trained public health official. When, and if, a public health official called back, researchers explained that they were not doctors but were working on a national study.

The key factor in providing fast responses seemed to be having a live person answer the initial phone call instead of forcing doctors to leave voice mail messages, said Dausey. In Alameda County, a receptionist answers all incoming calls during business hours, and after closing all calls are diverted to the Alameda County Sheriff's Department dispatcher, who then passes the message to an on-call public health doctor or nurse.

In San Francisco, public health officials set up a dedicated phone line, which is answered either by a receptionist or an answering service after hours.

In other words, in both departments a live person will answer the call around the clock.

"We basically try to call them back immediately," said Sandra Huang, director of communicable disease control units for the San Francisco Department of Public Health. "We have no way of knowing whether it's super urgent or not, so we have to call back right away. We figure if the doctor took the time to call us, they need a response immediately."

#### Online resources

**San francisco's public health disease reporting page can be found at:**

[links.sfgate.com/ZBYQ](http://links.sfgate.com/ZBYQ)

**Alameda county public health department can be found at:**

[links.sfgate.com/ZBYR](http://links.sfgate.com/ZBYR)

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