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Epidemic intelligence needs of stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific Region, 2017

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Purpose: Global surveillance systems are crucial for early detection, assessment and response to public health threats. The National Health and Medical Research Council Centre for Research Excellence, Integrated Systems for Epidemic Response is developing a new epidemic observatory, Epi-watch. Epi-watch monitors and provides critical analysis of global outbreaks and epidemics of public health significance for use by policy makers, government and other stakeholders. To inform further development of Epi-watch, we implemented a stakeholder survey to understand the global outbreak surveillance needs of stakeholders involved in epidemic response and surveillance in the Asia-Pacific region.

Methods & Materials: We designed an online semi-structured stakeholder questionnaire. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to identify 128 participants who use epidemic intelligence and outbreak alert services in their work in government and non-government organisations in selected countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Results: All respondents (N = 91) agreed that it was important to remain up to date with global outbreaks. The main reason for following outbreak news was as an early warning for serious epidemics (83/91; 91%). Mainstream media and specialist internet sources such as WHO (n = 54/91; 59%), ProMED-mail (n = 45/91; 49%) and CDC (n = 31/91; 34%) were the most common sources for global outbreak news, while use of rapid intelligence services such as HealthMap were less common (n = 9/91; 10%). Only 51% (46/91) of respondents thought their sources of outbreak news were timely and sufficient for their needs. Not enough critical appraisal (38/91; 42%) and lack of time (36/91; 40%) were reported as limitations of outbreak sources.

Conclusion: Epidemic intelligence is important and widely utilised. The choice of sources for global outbreak news varies. There is less use and awareness of rapid sources such as HealthMap and more reliance on less timely, traditional sources. Users identified a need for more timely and reliable epidemic intelligence, but were unaware of existing rapid sources. Better methods to deliver user-friendly epidemic intelligence to end-users should be explored. Results from this study will be used to further develop Epi-watch to meet end-user needs.

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