

Australia Day Award recognises collaboration in pandemic (H1N1) response

Three technical experts from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) were awarded Australia Day Achievement Awards in recognition of their work in responding to the 2009 pandemic (H1N1) in Australia.

Iain East, Jonathan Happold and Peter Dagg worked in the Department of Health and Aging (DoHA) National Incident Room during the outbreak, assisting with the preparation of situation reports and data analysis.

Over a period of 8 weeks, the three worked long shifts to assist DoHA to produce daily updates of national pandemic (H1N1) 2009 cases at 6.00am, 12.00pm and 6.00pm.

Besides lack of sleep, another challenge was coming to grips with the data on 2009 pandemic (H1N1) human cases and hospitalisations across the country. This was essential for being able to extract useful epidemiological information, and to rapidly compile information from different regions.

"Familiarity gained with DoHA's national incident database systems will no doubt help during future collaborations, and will reduce induction time during emergencies," Dr East said.

He also commented that his experience using DoHA's systems during this emergency has provided valuable information, which will be applied to future use of DAFF's incident database system, BioSIRT, during an emergency response.

"The placement was useful for DAFF staff to gain experience in emergency management in a human health context and it also further built relationships and contacts between the two departments," Dr East said. "Similar close collaboration between the two departments occurred when DoHA staff worked at DAFF during the equine influenza outbreak in 2007."

Speaking about establishing the inter-agency staff sharing arrangement, he said, "It was probably easier to accomplish because of an existing formal liaison group which had been established by DAFF and DoHA."

This liaison group holds structured regular meetings between DAFF and DoHA staff on issues of mutual concern to both departments, such as zoonoses and newly emerging diseases, which is consistent with the global One Health approach to zoonotic diseases that emerge at the animal-human-ecosystem interface.

While working at DoHA, Dr East also used his epidemiological expertise to address concerns about the potential impact of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 on remote indigenous communities with poor health standards and isolated from medical facilities.

Analysing data on the impact of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 on indigenous communities in the United States and Canada, meant he was able to develop a picture of what might occur in Australia and identify risks for preparedness planning.

Rhyll Vallis

Office of the Chief Veterinary Officer