

# A new line of defense against disease

It is more desirable to prevent a well person from getting sick than to make a sick person well. With that in mind, the Ministry of Health (MOH) is establishing epidemiology units in each of the Kingdom's health regions (Circular 866/6/21, dated 9/4/1414). Each unit has four main responsibilities: investigating outbreaks of disease, developing a surveillance system to detect diseases before they become epidemic, conducting health studies and surveys, and training workers in epidemiological techniques.

The units will work in cooperation with primary health care departments in the regions and the preventive medicine department in the MOH. Their work is intended not to replace the activities of already existing departments, but to enhance them, by providing a focus for epidemiological activities and by organizing workshops and seminars on the spread of disease. The main place of work for the units is the field: in primary health care centers (PHCCs), hospitals, field investigation and training. Gizan was the first region to set up a unit, which is headed by a graduate of the Field Epidemiology Training Program.

Development of the surveillance system is the key for all other functions of the epidemiology unit. The new concept of surveillance concentrates not just on infectious diseases but also on other health problems, including chronic, endemic, environmental and occupational diseases.

In establishing these units, the MOH considered the experience of the World Health Organization, which has initiated a worldwide "Program of Intensified Action for the Strengthening of Epidemiology Capacity." The two main objectives of this program are to raise the quality of epidemiologic data produced, including surveillance data, and to increase the use of those improved data at all levels of decision-making for health (1). It also sought to follow the example of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one of the most prominent centers for epidemiological activities in the world.

Regions can customize surveillance to meet their own resources and priorities. While some illnesses are found across the Kingdom, each region has unique problems. Some are mainly infectious diseases and environmental

sanitation; others are primarily byproducts of modern life, such as diabetes mellitus and hypertension; still others are occupational diseases.

The units are staffed by epidemiologists or specialists in public health or community medicine, and it is their job to provide decision-makers in the region with the right information at the proper time. An epidemiology unit may not be as glamorous as an organ transplant unit, but if given financial

and personnel support it will provide far more significant results for many more people.

*Reported by the Field Epidemiology Training Program.*

## Reference

(1) Hapsara HR. Welcoming remarks, Proceedings of the 1992 International Symposium on Public Health Surveillance. *MMWR* 1992; 41 Suppl: 1-4.

## What an epidemiology unit does

- **Outbreak investigation.** If an epidemic (an unusual number of cases) occurs either in the community or in a hospital, the unit begins an investigation to study the risk factors, detect the source of infection and suggest control measures. It will be assisted by hospital infection control committees and/or PHCC prevention units. The report of the investigation is presented to the assistant of the general director for primary health care, and the concerned department (environmental sanitation, infectious diseases department, etc.) takes action to control the problem.

- **Development of the surveillance system.** Currently, reports about disease (mainly infectious disease) are sent to regional primary health care departments from PHCCs and hospitals (MOH, governmental and private). This system will be developed and expanded to cover all items on the MOH's list of reportable diseases. The epidemiology unit will ensure that all data are reported quickly, regularly and accurately. The system needs to be both simple and flexible, to show the trends of diseases in the region and enable authorities to take timely action.

- **Health studies and surveys.** With the cooperation of concerned departments in the MOH and the regional health office, the unit will follow up on the data of regional registries and records of chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes registry) and other major health problems, and will conduct surveys to determine the magnitude of health problems. Tracking disease trends and mapping disease outbreaks will permit early intervention and preventive efforts. If there is any change in the trend of a disease, the unit should investigate it and report it. The resources and abilities of the health region should be kept in mind for such work.

- **Training.** The epidemiology unit will organize and cooperate with other departments in training personnel in PHCC prevention units and hospital infection control committees, to update their knowledge and give them new skills in outbreak investigation, surveillance, health research and disease control measures.

## National Cancer Registry is established in Kingdom

Beginning Jan. 1, 1994 (19 Rajab 1414), the newly created National Cancer Registry (NCR) began collecting data on cancer cases throughout the Kingdom. This will provide a unified system for cancer reporting and will give health planners a clear epidemiological map of the disease.

Cancer registration is the continuing process of systematic collection of data on the characteristics of all cancers and of the patients with cancer. Members of the NCR board include all major health providers.

The NCR has its main office in Ri-

yadh's King Faisal Specialist Hospital and four regional branches: Central in King Khalid University Hospital (Riyadh, Qassim and Hail), Eastern in King Fahad University Hospital (Dammam, Ahssa and Hafr Al-Batin), Western in King Abdulaziz Hospital (Jeddah, Makkah, Taif, Madinah, Tabuk, Goriat and Northern) and Southern (Asir, Baha, Gizan, Najran and Bisha).

The address is: National Cancer Registry, MBC-64, P.O. Box 3354, Riyadh 11211, Saudi Arabia; phone 01-442-3938 or fax 01-442-3941.