

Communicable disease control in emergencies

A field manual

Edited by M.A. Connolly



**World Health
Organization**

WHO Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

**Communicable disease control in emergencies: a field manual edited by
M. A. Connolly.**

**1. Communicable disease control—methods 2. Emergencies 3. Disease
outbreak, prevention and control 4. Manuals I. Connolly, Máire A.**

ISBN 92 4 154616 6

(NLM Classification: WA 110)

WHO/CDS/2005.27

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Edited by Máire Connolly, WHO/CDS.

Rick Brennan (IRC), Philippe Calain (WHO/CDS), Michelle Gayer (WHO/CDS), Tim Healing (Merlin), Myriam Henkens (MSF), Jean Long (Trinity College, Dublin), Serge Male (UNHCR), Pamela Mbabazi (WHO/CDS), Agostino Paganini (UNICEF), Jean Rigal (MSF), Mike Ryan (WHO/EPR), Peter Salama (CDC), Paul Spiegel (CDC), Mike Toole (Macfarlane Burnet Centre for Medical Research and Public Health) and Ron Waldman (Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University) contributed extensively to the development of this manual.

The following people contributed to the development and review of this document and their input is gratefully acknowledged:

Samira Aboubaker (WHO/CAH), Nathalie Agata (WHO/Ethiopia), Roberta Andraghetti (WHO/EPR), Ray Arthur (WHO/EPR), O. Babu-Swai (UNHCR, Kenya), Andrew Ball (WHO/HIV), Claudio Beltramello (WHO/CPE), Sylvie Briand (WHO/NTD), Nan Buzard (Sphere Project), Claire-Lise Chaignat (WHO/NTD), Claire Chauvin (WHO/IVB), Denis Coulombier (WHO/EPR), Charles Delacollette (WHO/RBM), Mike Deppner (UNHCR, Uganda), Philippe Desjeux (WHO/CPE), Hans Everts (WHO/IVB), Albis Francesco Gabrielli (WHO/CPE), Bernardus Ganter (WHO/EURO), Antonio Gerbase (WHO/HIV), Robin Gray (WHO/EDM), Tom Grein (WHO/EPR), Malgosia Grzemska (WHO/STB), Pierre Guillet (WHO/NTD), Zoheir Hallaj (WHO/EMRO), Max Hardiman (WHO/EPR), Christopher Haskew (WHO/CPE), Mary Healy (Trocaire, Ireland), Ana Maria Henao-Restrepo (WHO/IVB), Brad Hersh (WHO/IVB), David Heymann (WHO/CDS), Gottfried Hirnschall (WHO/HIV), Jose Hueb (WHO/PHE), Yvan Hutin (WHO/IVB), Jean Jannin (WHO/NTD),

Vijay Kumar (WHO/SEARO), Joël Lagoutte (ICRC, Geneva), Daniel Lavanchy (WHO/EPR), Dominique Legros (Epicentre), Alessandro Loretto (WHO/HAC), Paul Lusamba-Dikassa (WHO/AFRO), Chris Maher (WHO/Polio), Frédérique Marodon (WHO/CPE), Adelheid Marschang (IFRC), Zahra Mirghani (UNHCR), Lulu Muhe (WHO/CAH), Mike Nathan (WHO/NTD), Maria Neira (WHO/CPE), Hitoshi Oshitani (WHO/WPRO), Brian Pazvakavambwa (WHO/HIV), William Perea (WHO/EPR), Pierre Perrin (ICRC), Aafje Rietveld (WHO/RBM), Guénaél Rodier (WHO/CSR), Cathy Roth (WHO/EPR), Maria Santamaria (WHO/CSR), Akihiro Seita (WHO/EMRO), Khalid Shibib (WHO/HAC), Eigil Sorensen (WHO/DPRKorea), John Tabayi (UNHCR, Ethiopia), Nadia Teleb (WHO/EMRO), Jan Theunissen (WHO/EURO), Michel Thuriaux (WHO/CSR), A. Tijtsma (UNHCR), Kaat Vandemaele (WHO/EPR), Claude de Ville de Goyet (WHO/ PAHO), Zita Weise Prinzo (WHO/NHD), Brad Woodruff (CDC), Nevio Zagaria (WHO/CPE).

WHO would like to thank the Government of Ireland for its support in the development of this manual.

INTRODUCTION

This manual is intended to help health professionals and public health coordinators working in emergency situations prevent, detect and control the major communicable diseases encountered by affected populations. Emergencies include complex emergencies and natural disasters (e.g. floods and earthquakes). The term “complex emergencies” has been coined to describe “situations of war or civil strife affecting large civilian populations with food shortages and population displacement, resulting in excess mortality and morbidity”.

In this manual, the generic term “emergencies” will be used to encompass all situations in which large populations are in need of urgent humanitarian relief. Following an emergency, the affected population is often displaced and temporarily resettled. They may be placed in camps or become dispersed among the local population (either in towns or in rural communities). People who are displaced across national borders are termed refugees whereas those who have been displaced within their country are called “internally displaced persons” (IDPs). Resettlement in camps may entail high population densities, inadequate shelter, poor water supplies and sanitation, and a lack of even basic health care. In these situations, there is an increased threat of communicable disease and a high risk of epidemics.

Communicable diseases are a major cause of mortality and morbidity in emergencies, and particularly in complex emergencies, where collapsing health services and disease control programmes, poor access to health care, malnutrition, interrupted supplies and logistics, and poor coordination among the various agencies providing health care often coexist. The main causes of morbidity and mortality in emergencies are diarrhoeal diseases, acute respiratory infections, measles and, in areas where it is endemic, malaria. Other communicable diseases, such as epidemic meningococcal disease, tuberculosis, relapsing fever and typhus, have also caused large epidemics among emergency-affected populations. Malnutrition and trauma are the two main additional causes of illness and death.

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