

Commissioner's Corner
Protecting Westchester County Residents
Community Health Electronic Syndromic Surveillance

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In January 2003, the Westchester County Department of Health launched a computerized early warning syndromic surveillance system involving the participation of county hospitals and outpatient clinics. This highly-sophisticated Community Health Electronic Syndromic Surveillance (CHESS) system is an integral part of the county's efforts to improve emergency preparedness.

The CHESS system collects existing electronic data each day from the information systems at hospitals and outpatient clinics and uses these data to track and statistically analyze unusual levels or patterns of disease. Findings are then communicated to clinical staff each morning for review and possible follow-up.

At the outset, about one-third of Westchester hospitals participated in the CHESS system. Today, one hundred percent of hospitals in the county that have emergency departments, as well as selected outpatient clinics, send data files electronically.

Fortunately, there have been no large-scale public health emergencies since the establishment of the CHESS system. However, its sensitivity to spikes in the syndromes being monitored has been demonstrated several times, including the identification of the beginnings of flu season the past two winters. CHESS also caught what has been informally dubbed the "Clinton effect." Immediately following revelation of former President Clinton's heart problems last year, CHESS identified a spike in the respiratory syndrome being monitored. The patient listings produced by this respiratory spike revealed inordinate numbers of patients reporting to emergency departments with chest pain, confirming anecdotal reports of large increases in emergency department visits for this complaint following President Clinton's hospitalization.

In recognition of the importance of regional coordination and communication, CHESS recently partnered with the New York State Department of Health to share data received through CHESS for incorporation into the state's syndromic surveillance system. After receiving approval from each hospital, Westchester County now automatically sends its daily hospital emergency department files to the New York State Health Department following the national standard. The results of the state's analysis are shared with Westchester County. Westchester County and the surrounding localities also have the ability to view the regional results to evaluate how widespread patterns may be. This collaborative effort provides support for the development of locally-based systems that allow local flexibility in creating filters and modifying the analysis while at the same time supporting integration into a larger system.

Even with full participation of all County hospitals with emergency departments, opportunities for further strengthening the CHESS system exist. There is a need for building automated quality test procedures to ensure no changes have been made to the files received that would impact on the analysis. Developing the capability to electronic share statistical results with the individual hospitals would also be a valuable improvement.

In addition to county funds, this project was made possible with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, from the New York State Department of Health, and through Congresswoman Nita Lowey's Office.

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The effectiveness of the CHES system has received national recognition. CHES was presented at the Second National Syndromic Surveillance Conference in October 2003 and is being used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as a model program for other county and state health departments. The CHES team has also provided direction, input and technical support to other counties and states interested in building similar systems.

Although the CHES system has proven to be extremely valuable in identifying unusual levels or patterns of disease, it is not able to pick up individual cases of reportable disease. Therefore, the system does not eliminate the need for reporting by physicians of any cases of reportable diseases encountered. Physicians in the county are urged to continue diligent reporting of each case of reportable disease and any unusual events or cases of special concern to the Westchester County Health Department.


Physicians interested in learning more about the CHES system can contact Renee Recchia, Assistant Commissioner for Planning and Evaluation, at the Westchester County Department of Health by calling (914) 813-5100. ♦

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