

Bioterrorism Preparedness for Dental Professionals: A Pilot Study

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Issue: In the event of a public health emergency, such as a bioterrorist (BT) event or pandemic (e.g., avian influenza) event, dental professionals have a role to play in emergency preparedness and response. In addition to diagnosis, monitoring, and surveillance of community outbreaks, the clinical skills and capabilities of these professionals can help meet surge capacity needs. A first step in emergency preparedness is disaster education and training.

Project: A BT educational program was developed and implemented. The three and a half hour program was presented to members of the New York County Dental Society (N = 82). Evaluation consisted of a brief post-test and course evaluation.

Results: A total of 82 dental professionals participated in the study. After the program, 72% (n = 59) understood the reporting requirements for suspected bioterrorism cases, 68% (n = 56) were aware of the effectiveness of smallpox vaccination to prevent disease in those exposed, 91% (n = 75) were aware that signs and symptoms of BT diseases initially present as a flu-like illness, 95% (n = 78) identified the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as the best source of information related to BT diseases, 67% (n = 55) believed that individual practitioners should have an emergency response plan for their own practice. In regards to program evaluation, a majority of dentists, 83% (n = 68) felt that information on BT diseases was useful to their practice.

Conclusions: After the training, dental professionals had high levels of knowledge concerning BT and the public health response. In this small pilot sample, dental professionals were interested in participating in the public health response to a BT event and understood that their skills and abilities would be valuable assets in a response. Additional training, including participation in drills, would probably be effective in supporting response efforts.

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