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Module 3: Salad Bar Salmonella Report

Despite modern advancements in food safety, an event similar to the Rajneeshpuram Salmonella outbreak of 1984 is possible today as well. Although, it is likely that the people involved would be apprehended much sooner. Surveillance has come a long way since the 1980s and resources for investigators would include CCTV, monitoring internet traffic, as well as drone and satellite imagery. The fact that this case was initially handled as a food-borne outbreak greatly hindered the investigation. If terrorism had been suspected first, then it is likely that different measures would have been taken. The Wasco County sheriff's office would have mobilized its task force much earlier on and they would have focused on searching for people rather than rooting out a foodborne cause of infection. Previous tension between Wasco County residents and Rajneeshees led many locals to believe that this outbreak was an attack orchestrated by the cult, yet this factor was largely ignored.¹

This event remains "the largest bioterror attack in American History" and was indeed a public health disaster.² A total of 751 people were affected over an almost 2-month period. 45 were hospitalized, and all experienced three or more symptoms including fever, chills, nausea, vomiting, pain, and bloody stools. The fact that this went on for an extended period of time unregulated and caused severe disease in a large group of people is enough to deem this a public health disaster. Although CDC investigations showed no signs of food handlers as culprits, "Health authorities remained unanimous in blaming [them]."^{3,4} This was very surprising as the Rajneeshees had previously voted in Antelope, Oregon's local elections and taken over the town.⁵ This chain of events supports the idea that there was poor coordination between public health and law enforcement. The evidence that finally uncovered the Rajneeshees as culprits was a statement from the cult's spiritual leader who fled and went to authorities to act as a whistleblower.¹

As a public health professional, I would be most concerned about finding the location or source of an outbreak, isolating cases, and potential health complications as illness progressed in affected individuals. I would also be strongly concerned with investigating the local context of an event, garnering strong support from law enforcement, and exhausting all leads in the case that initial investigations do not produce viable results.

Sources

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