

Case Study 2: An Epidemic of Thyrotoxicosis

Adapted from CDC, Epidemiology Program Office, Case Studies in Applied Epidemiology

Part 1

On the afternoon of June 16, 1985, an endocrinologist at the University of South Dakota, Sioux Falls, was examining a patient with recent-onset thyrotoxicosis (manifestations of excess thyroid hormone) when the patient mentioned that there were four other people in his small town with the same problem. The patient was the postmaster of Valley Springs, South Dakota (population 801). Just a few days earlier, the endocrinologist had read an abstract of a CDC investigation describing an epidemic of painless thyroiditis in York County, Nebraska, in early 1984. Although the cause was never determined, the most likely etiology was believed to be viral infection. By speaking with other local physicians, the endocrinologist identified seven other patients with possible thyrotoxicosis. Six of the patients lived in Valley Springs, and two lived in southwest Minnesota. All exhibited classic symptoms of thyrotoxicosis (anxiety, shortness of breath, palpitations, rapid heartbeat, weight loss), and all had markedly elevated thyroxine (T₄) levels. All but one had abnormally low radiiodine thyroid uptakes. The endocrinologist called CDC and provided the EIS Officer with the information summarized in the line listing below.

Table 1. Line listing of patients with clinical thyrotoxicosis reported to CDC on initial telephone call, June 18, 1985

<u>Patient</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Residence</u>	<u>Onset date</u>	<u>Max. T₄*</u>	<u>24-hr. RAIU (%)†</u>
1	53	M	Valley Springs, S.D.	3-84	>20	0.6
2	34	F	Valley Springs, S.D.	5-85	18	17.0
3	57	M	Beaver Creek, S.D.	5-85	22	1.0
4	41	F	Valley Springs, S.D.	5-85	18	2.6
5	76	F	Valley Springs, S.D.	6-85	14	7.8
6	?	M	Luverne, Minn.	6-85	"high"	1.0
7	29	M	Valley Springs, S.D.	?	27	2.2
8	?	M	Luverne, Minn.	?	"high"	"low"

* Normal range = 5-12.

† RAIU - radioactive iodine uptake; normal range = 10%-35%.

Questions

1. If you were the EIS Officer receiving the call, would you be able to say that an epidemic exists?
2. What other kind of information would you want to know?
3. What would you do next?

Answers For An Epidemic Of Thyrotoxicosis

Dave Frahm



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