

UDC 378.147:616-051:616-036.22:614.2
<https://doi.org/10.31612/2616-4868.6.2025.15>

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION IN THE TRAINING OF FIELD EPIDEMIOLOGISTS FOR THE PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Abstract

Introduction. Modern challenges in the field of public health require high-quality training of qualified specialists who are able to effectively confront epidemiological threats. Maintaining and increasing the number of professional, well-trained workers remains a crucial factor for optimal response to infectious diseases and protection in the public health system.

Aim. The work consists of researching and improving the organization of practical training of future field epidemiologists within the framework of master's programs, particularly through implementing a competency-based approach (CBE), which involves the formation of practical skills in real conditions.

Materials and methods. The work used a systematic approach to the analysis of the organization of practical training of future field epidemiologists. The basis of the study was official WHO documents, as well as scientific publications on epidemiological education.

Results. For the practical training of field epidemiologists within the framework of master's programs, a comprehensive approach was applied, which included WHO recommendations and the experience of leading international training programs, such as the Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP). The Master's program for training field epidemiologists, which was developed based at the Bogomolets National Medical University, has a clearly expressed practical orientation, in which field practice plays a leading role. This approach ensures a gradual transition from the acquisition of theoretical knowledge to the acquisition of real practical experience through the active participation of applicants in real epidemiological studies and response to events in the field of public health.

Conclusions. The organization of practice for field epidemiologists studying in the master's program is an extremely important component of the training program, since it is this practically oriented fragment of training that allows transforming the acquired theoretical knowledge into real practical skills and forming professional competencies.

Keywords: epidemiology, competency-based education, epidemiologists, public health, disease outbreaks, communication, research

INTRODUCTION

Modern challenges in the field of public health require high-quality training of qualified specialists who are able to effectively confront epidemiological threats. The events of recent years – the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergencies – have highlighted the importance of professional training of epidemiologists who are able to work in the field, carry out effective epidemiological surveillance, and respond to disease outbreaks. As the COVID-19 emergency recedes, it is time to rethink the core values of the epidemiologist profession and draw

attention to the new challenges and opportunities that await humanity ahead [1].

Maintaining and increasing the number of professional, well-trained workers remains a crucial factor for optimal response to infectious diseases and protection in the public health system [2].

Competency-Based Education (CBE) is an educational approach that prioritizes the acquisition of specific skills and practical experience compared to traditional educational models that often focus on broader knowledge [3]. CBE is an educational approach that

focuses on developing specific professional competencies in students, rather than just acquiring theoretical knowledge. It was officially endorsed by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020 for the training of public health professionals, including field epidemiologists [4, 5]. This approach allows future professionals to not only acquire theoretical knowledge but also develop skills to respond to real threats in the public health system.

AIM

The aim consists of researching and improving the organization of practical training of future field epidemiologists within the framework of master's programs, particularly through implementing a competency-based approach (CBE), which involves the formation of practical skills in real conditions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The work used a systematic approach to the analysis of the organization of practical training of future field epidemiologists. The basis of the study was official WHO documents, as well as scientific publications on epidemiological education [6, 7, 8, 9]. Additionally, the experience of leading international training programs, such as the Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP) of the CDC and the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), was analyzed.

RESULTS

For the practical training of field epidemiologists within the framework of master's programs, a comprehensive approach was applied, which included WHO recommendations and the experience of leading international training programs, such as FETP. Particular attention was paid to the assessment of CBE, which involves the formation of key practical skills necessary to respond to current epidemiological challenges. These include participation in field research, investigation of infectious disease outbreaks, and processing and interpretation of epidemiological data. The empirical basis of the study is data collected in the process of cooperation with regional centers for disease control and prevention in Ukraine. Leading international programs like FETP CDC [10], Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [11, 12], and training initiatives of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) are based on the principle of learning by doing [13]. According to the analysis of programs implemented to train specialists in field epidemiology [14, 15, 16], students devote up to 80% of their time to practical work in real conditions: from investigating infectious disease outbreaks to analyzing epidemiological surveillance data. For example, in the FETP CDC, each resident works directly in health authorities for 2 years, participating in emergency responses – from collecting

samples during an outbreak of food poisoning to developing recommendations for local authorities. ECDC programs, such as EPIET [17, 18], emphasize work in interdisciplinary teams, where epidemiologists conduct risk assessments, use GIS systems to track the spread of diseases, and prepare reports for the European Commission.

Qualitatively organized industrial practice contributes to the formation of practical skills and competencies in future field epidemiologists studying in master's programs through active involvement in applied epidemiological research, which includes: analysis of the epidemiological situation, response to outbreaks of infectious diseases, assessment of the effectiveness of the epidemiological surveillance system, development and implementation of preventive measures to reduce the incidence rate, strengthening the public health system, etc.

The Master's program for training field epidemiologists, which was developed based at the Bogomolets National Medical University, has a clearly expressed practical orientation, in which industrial practice plays a leading role. This approach ensures a gradual transition from the acquisition of theoretical knowledge to the acquisition of real practical experience through the active participation of applicants in real epidemiological studies and response to events in the field of public health. The practical component of the program is aimed at the formation of key professional skills, including: collection and analysis of epidemiological data, work with samples and relevant documentation, effective communication with different target audiences, the application of critical thinking for decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, work in conditions of limited resources and the ability to act promptly based on incomplete information.

Within the framework of the formation of professional competencies, master's students conduct epidemiological research: from planning and data collection to statistical analysis and interpretation of results. Considerable attention is paid to the practical use of the obtained data to substantiate management decisions in the field of health care. Important learning outcomes are also the ability to prepare scientific publications, epidemiological reports, and information materials for various audiences.

The practice of field epidemiologists is structured into three main stages (Figure 1).

At the organizational stage, the master is given an introductory briefing on occupational safety, receives a work program for practice, and draws up an individual practice plan. The foundational stage involves mastering practical skills in accordance with the program learning outcomes, performing practical tasks under the guidance of experienced mentors, and participating in field research and outbreak investigations. At the final stage, a practice diary is drawn up, reporting materials are prepared, and the practice is defended at the department.

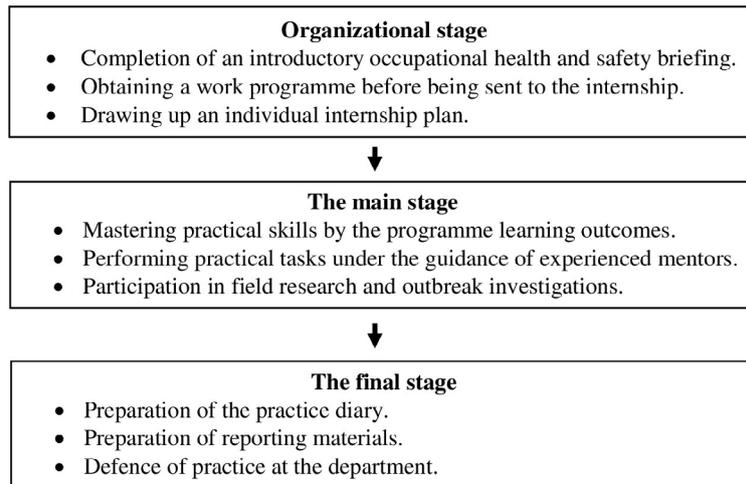


Figure 1. Stages of the practical part of training field epidemiologists.

With this organization of practical training, masters in field epidemiology, after successful completion of their studies, acquire the ability to conduct comprehensive epidemiological surveillance, detect and investigate public health events, respond promptly to outbreaks of infectious diseases, and plan and implement epidemiological studies. They learn to effectively use data for decision-making, prepare scientific publications and reports, and develop and evaluate public health programs. Particular attention is paid to mastering methods for rapid detection and analysis of events, in particular, rapid risk assessment, collection of reliable epidemiological data,

and implementation of effective anti-epidemic measures. Graduates demonstrate the ability to manage epidemic situations – from the initial response to post-facto analysis of the effectiveness of the measures taken – using modern epidemiological analysis tools. Graduates will be prepared to develop, implement, and evaluate disease prevention and health promotion programs, taking into account both the local context and international standards.

In case of detection of an infectious hazard (outbreak), the future field epidemiologist must adhere to the following algorithm of actions (Figure 2).

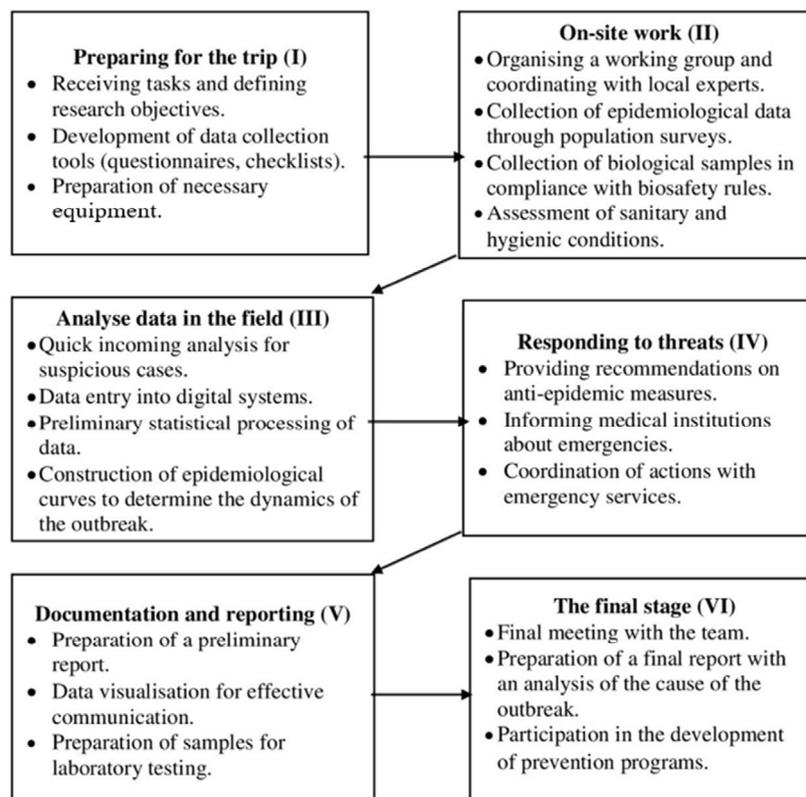


Figure 2. The algorithm of action of a field epidemiologist.

Before leaving for the center, he will receive a task and determine the objectives of the study, develop data collection tools, and prepare the necessary equipment. When working in the center, a working group is created, and work is coordinated with local specialists. Epidemiological data is collected through a population survey, biological samples are taken in compliance with biosafety rules, and sanitary and hygienic conditions are assessed. The next step is data analysis, which involves entering data into digital systems, preliminary statistical processing of data, and construction of epidemiological curves to determine the dynamics of the outbreak. The future specialist actively participates in the development of anti-epidemic recommendations, promptly informs medical institutions, and coordinates actions with emergency services. At the final stage, they analyze data, prepares reports with visualization of results, participates in meetings, and develops prevention programs to prevent future outbreaks.

DISCUSSION

Practical training of students of master's programs in field epidemiology should be holistic and applied. Modern practical training of future epidemiologists should combine work with real epidemiological data, active participation in outbreak investigations, and development of communication skills with different target groups. To achieve optimal results, it is necessary to integrate modern digital tools for data analysis, develop crisis communication skills, and provide constant mentoring support from experienced specialists. Such a comprehensive approach allows the formation of professional competencies necessary for an effective response to modern challenges in the field of public health, combining theoretical knowledge with practical skills in real-world settings.

The Field Epidemiology Training Programs (FETPs) are applied epidemiology programs designed to train public health workers in the prevention, detection, and containment of infectious disease outbreaks and the management of disease surveillance systems [19, 20, 21].

The training of future field epidemiologists within the master's program should be based on the practical application of the key functions of epidemiological surveillance identified by WHO. According to WHO, «an effective surveillance system has the following functions: detection and reporting of health-related events, collection and consolidation of relevant data, investigation and confirmation (epidemiological, clinical and/or laboratory) of cases or outbreaks, routine analysis and reporting, feedback of information to those who provide data, direct linkage (i.e. forwarding of data to more centralized levels), reporting of data to the next administrative level» [22].

Surveillance data can be used for a variety of purposes, including determining prevention strategies and

resource targeting, detecting disease outbreaks of local, national, and international significance, and evaluating control measures in public health [23].

According to international experience, the need for properly trained epidemiologists to strengthen countries' capacities for epidemiological disease surveillance, epidemiological investigations, and outbreak response is a requirement recognized by the global health community [11, 24, 25].

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) developed several tools to support and guide outbreak preparedness, investigation, and response activities which is a source of information for masters who are involved in the investigation of epidemics or outbreaks, studying unusual clusters or isolated cases, arising in response to natural disasters, and conducting a special survey of vulnerable populations [25, 26, 27]. This process includes: reviewing relevant public health literature; developing a data collection and analysis plan; creating surveys and data collection instruments; analyzing the collected data and formulating conclusions; and determining the need for further research.

Disease monitoring systems are a major source of information for management decisions. Analysis of data from the epidemiological surveillance system involves: familiarization with the epidemiological surveillance system in the practice area; description of the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the system; analysis, generalization, and interpretation of data; preparation of a report and presentation of the results.

The effectiveness of preventive measures depends on the functioning of the surveillance system. When assessing the epidemiological surveillance system, Master's-level professionals must be able to: develop new monitoring mechanisms taking into account local characteristics; implement the developed systems according to the action plan; verify outbreak response criteria; optimize routine analysis of surveillance data. These skills are especially relevant in resource-limited settings, when it is necessary to use available tools as efficiently as possible.

In addition to operational work, epidemiologists participate in scientific research aimed at studying the causes of diseases; evaluating the effectiveness of vaccination and other preventive measures; and developing risk reduction strategies. Such research is often interdisciplinary in nature, combining methods from sociology, biostatistics, and clinical medicine. According to WHO, epidemiological studies can be transdisciplinary, systemic, and include mixed methods (qualitative/quantitative) and approaches, taking into account socio-economic factors [6].

According to the WHO (2023), communication includes the competencies required to communicate

information at local, regional, and national levels. Field epidemiologists must have effective oral and written communication skills across a variety of audiences and be familiar with strategies for communicating risks to human, animal, and environmental health. Field epidemiologists must understand the differences in routine communication of field findings to frontline epidemiologists compared to emergency communication during outbreaks or pandemics [6].

Communication skills are critical for epidemiologists. Specialists must be able to: prepare understandable reports for various target groups (doctors, officials, media); present data at conferences and briefings; use visualization tools (tables, infographics, interactive maps); and prepare scientific articles for publication. Effective communication helps to mobilize resources to combat epidemics and inform the population about the risks.

In their practical work, field epidemiologists – especially those at the master's level – must be proficient in modern systems and specialized tools. These include Go.Data, the Electronic Integrated Disease Surveillance System (EIDSS), and statistical software (R, SPSS, Excel) for data analytics, all of which enhance operational efficiency [28, 29].

Mentoring is key to successful training. In the context of FETP, «a mentor is an experienced epidemiologist who provides technical and supportive guidance to training program participants, especially regarding their fieldwork» [7]. The mentoring system during internship provides that each master is assigned a mentor – an experienced epidemiologist or public health worker who: accompanies the entire internship period, provides technical and advisory assistance, evaluates the implementation of field projects, and assists in interpreting data and formulating conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

A practice-oriented approach, consistent with the principles of CBE (WHO, 2020), develops graduates' ability to timely identify and effectively respond to modern epidemic risks, as well as adapt to dynamic changes in the health sector. High-quality training of field epidemiology specialists is a key factor in strengthening the public health system at all levels – from regional to national. The development of the professional potential of field epidemiology specialists ensures preparedness for potential epidemic threats, which is an important component of national health security.

The organization of practice for field epidemiologists studying in the master's program is an extremely important component of the training program, since it is this practically oriented fragment of training that allows transforming the acquired theoretical

knowledge into real practical skills and forming professional competencies. Properly organized practice creates conditions for immersing future specialists in the real conditions of working with priority diseases, monitoring the epidemic situation, and adequate participation in responding to outbreaks.

Key features of this form of training include a strong focus on fieldwork, involving participation in real epidemiological investigations. The practical part of the training is based on a structured learning approach, which includes mentoring from experienced professionals, as well as the use of an integrated competency development model aimed at developing both technical and communicative and analytical skills.

Key principles of field epidemiology – high professionalism, thoroughness in the collection and analysis of epidemiological data, effective surveillance, rapid response to outbreaks, and conducting applied research that provides timely and practical information for public health decision-making. The continued success of field epidemiologists in public health will depend on the ability to adapt, collaborate, innovate, communicate effectively, and, most importantly, make a tangible contribution to strengthening and preserving the health of the population.

Perspectives for further research. The work conducted indicates the strengthening of the potential of field epidemiology training programs in the area of noncommunicable diseases.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL REQUIREMENTS

This review article is based on an analysis of publicly available scientific data published in peer-reviewed journals, clinical guidelines, and databases. No patient-identifying data were used during the work, and no approval from an ethics committee was required, as the study did not involve new clinical interventions or primary collection of patient information. No element of the work contains plagiarism or fabrication of data. All sources of information are appropriately cited and properly formatted.

FUNDING AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The study was conducted without financial support from third-party organizations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Резюме

КОМПЕТЕНТІСНО-ОРІЄНТОВАНА ОСВІТА У ПІДГОТОВЦІ ПОЛЬОВИХ ЕПІДЕМІОЛОГІВ ДЛЯ СИСТЕМИ ГРОМАДСЬКОГО ЗДОРОВ'Я: ВІД ТЕОРІЇ ДО ПРАКТИКИ

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Вступ. Сучасні виклики у сфері громадського здоров'я потребують якісної підготовки кваліфікованих спеціалістів, які здатні ефективно протистояти епідеміологічним загрозам. Підтримка та збільшення кількості професійних, добре навчених працівників залишається вирішальним фактором для оптимального реагування на інфекційні захворювання та захист в системі громадського здоров'я.

Мета. Робота полягає у дослідженні та вдосконаленні організації практичної підготовки майбутніх польових епідеміологів у рамках магістерських програм, зокрема через впровадження компетентнісного підходу (СВЕ), що передбачає формування практичних навичок в реальних умовах.

Матеріали та методи. У роботі використано системний підхід до аналізу організації практичної підготовки майбутніх польових епідеміологів. Основу дослідження склали офіційні документи ВООЗ, а також наукові публікації з питань епідеміологічної освіти.

Результати. Для практичної підготовки польових епідеміологів у межах магістерських програм застосовано комплексний підхід, що включав рекомендації ВООЗ та досвід провідних міжнародних програм підготовки, таких як Field Epidemiology Training Program. Магістерська програма з підготовки польових епідеміологів, яка розроблена на базі НМУ імені О.О. Богомольця має чітко виражену практичну орієнтацію, у якій провідну роль відіграє виробнича практика. Такий підхід забезпечує поступовий перехід від засвоєння теоретичних знань до набуття реального практичного досвіду шляхом активної участі здобувачів у реальних епідеміологічних дослідженнях і реагуванні на події у сфері громадського здоров'я.

Висновки. Організація практики для польових епідеміологів, які навчаються за магістерською програмою є надзвичайно важливою складовою програми навчання, оскільки саме цей практично орієнтований фрагмент навчання дозволяє трансформувати отримані теоретичні знання у реальні практичні навички та сформувати професійні компетентності.

Ключові слова: епідеміологія, компетентнісно-орієнтована освіта, епідеміологи, громадське здоров'я, спалахи захворювань, комунікація, дослідження

Received: 17.03.2025

Accepted: 2.06.2025