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Data Literacy for Public Health & Epidemiology Teams Playbook

Reading surveillance data well enough to distinguish a genuine outbreak signal from reporting noise

- Practitioner
- Intermediate
- Template Included

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- 4 minute(s)

Overview

A framework for building data literacy within public health and epidemiology teams — surveillance data quality assessment, distinguishing genuine trend signals from reporting artifacts, and communicating uncertainty to policymakers and the public — addressing the specific high-stakes communication and interpretation challenges public health data work involves.

Public health surveillance systems are already technically

sophisticated — where's the specific data literacy gap? Technical sophistication in data collection doesn't automatically produce sound interpretation — recognizing reporting artifacts (changes in testing volume, reporting lag variation) versus genuine epidemiological signal, and communicating appropriate uncertainty to policymakers, are distinct literacy challenges beyond the underlying surveillance infrastructure.

Why does uncertainty communication matter so much specifically in

public health contexts? Public health decisions often need to be made under genuine uncertainty, and communicating that uncertainty honestly to policymakers and the public — rather than false precision — is essential both for good decision-making and for maintaining public trust when initial estimates are later revised.

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