Background: FETP and Its Importance to Global Health Security

A field epidemiology training program (FETP) is a program that builds capacity in health service agencies by providing training in field epidemiology and other public health competencies within the context of health delivery systems. These programs train health workers in field epidemiology so that they can be the “boots on the ground” in the fight against diseases. Field epidemiologists examine diseases at their source and are often referred to as “disease detectives,” collecting, analyzing and interpreting data to help government ministries of health and other agencies respond more effectively during outbreaks. Nearly 80 percent of FETP graduates continue to serve in public health programs in their home countries. More than 80 programs currently operate around the world.

TEPHINET: The Only Global Network of FETPs

Formed in 1997 as FETPs worldwide sought a way to share information and experiences, Training Programs in Epidemiology and Public Health Interventions Network (TEPHINET) is a global network of FETPs, trainees, and graduates. Currently, TEPHINET comprises 72 programs actively training field epidemiologists in more than 100 countries. TEPHINET member programs include those with laboratory and veterinary education components. Overall, TEPHINET member programs comprise approximately 4,770 current trainees and 14,000 graduates who play a critical role in improving global health security by strengthening country capacity to detect and respond to disease outbreaks and other public health emergencies. With a secretariat based in Atlanta, Georgia, USA and an advisory board of global representatives, TEPHINET is the only global network of FETPs and works closely with regional FETP networks and sub-regional and national programs.

What is TEPHINET’s Accreditation Program?

While the general FETP model was adapted from that of the CDC Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS), the structure and curriculum of each FETP around the world can vary significantly according to the needs of the country and the resources available for program development. Recognizing the need for a set of common standards for field epidemiology training around the world to produce the most qualified graduates, TEPHINET developed the process and standards for accreditation with input from its global network of programs and partners. Accreditation is an opportunity for FETPs to align with these common standards supporting quality training and increased recognition of their value in achieving country public health priorities.

Since the launch of its first cycle of accreditation in 2016, TEPHINET has accredited 18 programs (Australia, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, China, Colombia, Germany, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, South Africa, Tanzania, US, UK, and Zimbabwe).
These standards for FETP accreditation are grouped into five domains:

- Management, Infrastructure and Operations
- Staffing and Supervision
- Continuous Quality Improvement
- Integration with Public Health Service
- Selection and Training of Residents

**Why is It Important?**

In light of recent public health emergencies such as Ebola, Zika, 2019-nCoV and influenza, it is more important than ever to have highly trained public health experts and epidemiologists working throughout the world. Accreditation ensures a country’s FETP curriculum contains critical public health coursework (for example, epidemiology methods, public health surveillance, outbreak investigation, scientific communications), and it requires each FETP graduate to complete 68 weeks of mandated field work over two years. In addition, because the field epidemiology training takes place in-country, graduates have the language skills and cultural competencies to best respond to local public health threats.

**Accreditation’s Impact**

Accredited field epidemiology training programs result in an increasing number of highly trained public health officials with the appropriate skills and training to respond to public health events and emergencies. Accredited FETPs graduate highly skilled public health workers trained in surveillance, disease detection, outbreak investigation and outbreak containment to serve local populations.

FETPs are increasingly recognized for their importance in health systems strengthening, and one country, Colombia, recently experienced accreditation’s immediate impact. In the years leading up to accreditation, the Colombia FETP improved the quality of their program and began conducting outbreak investigations and disease containment activities at the border with Venezuela. Colombia’s FETP received accreditation during TEPHINET’s third accreditation cycle, which concluded in November 2018. The following month, TEPHINET representatives presented the accreditation plaque during a visit that Colombia’s president, Dr. Ivan Duque, and Minister of Health, Dr. Juan Pablo Uribe, conducted at the Colombian National Institute of Health (NIH), which houses the FETP.

During the ceremony, the President announced that the government would double the NIH budget for the following year. He recognized the impact of the FETP’s work at the Venezuelan border, managing and leading the health emergency response from the National Emergency Operations Center based at the NIH and coordinated by FETP graduates and fellows. The President also announced that he would directly supervise the NIH in finalizing and receiving its certification from the Ministry of Education to become an official educational institution. This designation would allow the FETP and the NIH to provide postgraduate and continuing education trainings related to field epidemiology to candidates within the country and from the region (academic degree distinctions are still in progress). This elevated designation has the potential to attract a larger number of qualified and talented individuals to the program and the overall workforce.

**Expanding Accreditation and Quality Improvement Initiatives**

Supporting TEPHINET’S Accreditation Program will result in more countries around the world with improved capacity to respond to public health emergencies. Having trained or accredited 58 programs, TEPHINET continues to offer training on the accreditation process and standards at conferences and stand-alone events, in an ongoing effort to increase the proportion of advanced-level programs that are accredited. New in 2020, TEPHINET is piloting an accreditation process for intermediate programs. For the first time, these programs will also be able to seek accredited status. Also new in 2020, a Small Quality Improvement Grants initiative is providing opportunities for peer-to-peer exchange (for program directors and coordinators); expanded technical assistance from accreditation subject matter experts; and small grants for program-led quality improvement projects. This funding will also help programs that are not ready for accreditation to improve the quality of their programming. Ongoing support of the program will allow TEPHINET to continue to accredit additional programs and offer quality improvement opportunities and assistance to all programs.