Experiment of surveillance for long-term care facilities for elderly people

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高齢者介護施設におけるサーベイランスの検討

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Abstract

Background: Long-term care facilities for elderly people have been vulnerable to COVID-19 outbreaks.

Object: We examined construction of a surveillance system to share information about facilities for elderly people with physicians, commissioned doctors, public health centers, and other nearby facilities. Then we operated the system as an experiment.

Method: We constructed the system and operated it at two facilities for more than three months. Especially, information sharing among commissioned doctors, local governments, public health centers, and medical associations was included in the system. Moreover, community situation awareness was done by including neighboring facilities, (nursery) schools, and prescriptions from other but similar surveillance systems.

Results: We constructed the system, operated it, and confirmed its feasibility for data entry at facilities. However, real time information sharing has not been activated because of the scarcity of corporate facilities. Moreover, situational awareness in the community has been developed using information from other systems.

Discussion: Experiments including a larger number of facilities with real-time information sharing represents an urgent challenge.

1. Introduction

Even before SARS-Cov-2 emerged, infection control at long-term care facilities for elderly people was regarded as important to save residents' life and safety [1,2]. The viruses causing most outbreaks at facilities were influenza or noroviruses at that time.

Since SARS-Cov-2 emerged, fatal cases of infected COVID-19 were concentrated at first among elderly people because of pneumonia [3–6]. After the delta variant strain emerged, underlying diseases caused death mainly in infected elderly people. Its effects were marked, even in Japan [7]. Therefore, long-term care facilities for elderly people have been the places which have been most vulnerable to COVID-19 outbreaks. In other words, surveillance and timely detection of outbreaks at these facilities are expected to be the most important countermeasures against COVID-19.

Nevertheless, surveillance of these facilities has remained underdeveloped, even though surveillance for (nursery) schools has been used widely worldwide [8–16]. Of course, school children and children younger than school age are susceptible to many infectious diseases. They have sometimes amplified outbreaks. By contrast, at least for COVID-19, mortality in children is certainly much less than among elderly people. In other words, surveillance at facilities for elderly people, in particular real time surveillance, is expected to be important to reduce disease burdens of COVID-19, even after omicron or the following variant strain dominated and countermeasures against COVID-19 among younger generations narrowed to become comparable with seasonal influenza.

Therefore, this study was conducted to examine construction of a syndromic surveillance system and to propose its mode of operation in the near future.

2. Method

We constructed a web system for smart phone reporting by each facility of the number of residents or staff members with certain symptoms or who had been diagnosed as having infectious diseases by units where residents live together and were managed. Staff designations were assumed to be a unit. Figure 1 presents the system concept. Targeted symptoms included fever, cough or difficulty breathing, vomiting, diarrhea, eruption, and others. Diagnosed infectious diseases included COVID-19, influenza, infectious gastroenteritis, herpes zoster, scabies, and others.

The figure shows a chart of the number of elderly people with symptoms or diagnosed infectious diseases and aberrations. Aberrations were defined by unit in each facility as C1 of the EARS algorithm [17,18], which was developed and recommended to use by the US CDC and which is widely used for syndromic surveillance.

If an aberration was detected, such information was delivered to commissioned doctors, public health

centers, medical associations, and local governments that are allowed access to data at the facility, as shown on the right-hand side of Figure 1.

Moreover, an information exchange scheme among other neighboring facilities and other systems included (N)SASSy and prescription surveillance to present situational awareness, as shown at the left-hand side of Figure 1.
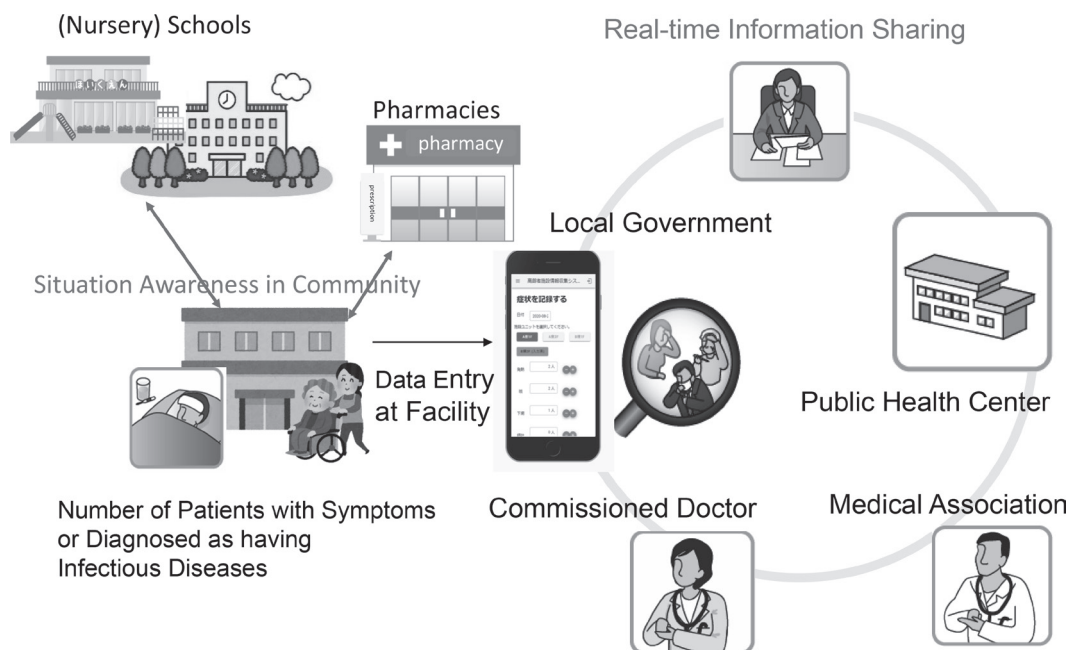

Figure 1: Concept of Facility Surveillance including real-time information sharing and situation awareness in the community.

3. Results

We constructed the system and started to enter the situation at the facility from January 2022 at facilities in Ibaraki prefecture, Japan, in northern Tokyo. Unfortunately, as of May 2020, information at facilities has not been shared among involved persons such as commissioned doctors or public health centers, yet. Moreover, information exchange among other neighboring facilities and other systems including (N)SASSy and prescription surveillance to recognize situation awareness have been under construction.

We confirmed the feasibility of entering data at the facility. Moreover, the automatic aberration detection mechanism was confirmed to function precisely.

4. Discussion

Although an earlier study examined the practicality of surveillance at long-term care facilities based on observations by staff members [19], no prototype of such a system has been examined in any country. In this sense, the examination conducted for this study yielded unique and valuable results.

Because data for each facility were analyzed, the criteria for aberration detection differed among unit and facilities. Therefore, these aberrations were robust to differences in definitions of symptoms or characteristics of residents among units and facilities. In other words, criteria for aberration detection incorporated these differences among units and facilities.

Unfortunately, facilities incorporated into the system were few. Information sharing among involved persons such as commissioned doctors and public health centers was not activated. Pervasion of the system among facilities and involvement of related individuals and organizations is the next urgent issue. To make the system more widely available, we have tried to develop automatic coordination with electronic care records used at the facilities.

Moreover, we plan to exchange information with other surveillance systems such as (N)SASSy [11–16] and prescription surveillance [20–23]. The former reflects the actual conditions of infectious disease at nursery schools and schools. Staff at facilities sometimes live distant from the facilities, but information provided by (N)SASSy is expected to be helpful to recognize situations where their children live. Moreover, the latter can detect influenza outbreaks rapidly. If drug therapy for COVID-19 is administered to outpatients, then surveillance will reflect rapid detection of influenza. Exchange information is anticipated as the next challenge.

Limitations

First, as described above, the constructed system in the current version had limited function. Therefore, we cannot evaluate the overall system including real time information sharing and situation awareness using other surveillance systems in the community. To do so, we must expand corporate facilities to concerns such as public health centers that want to join the system.

Second, if the facilities record care reports electronically, the system must upload information from facilities automatically to eliminate effort expended at entering the data manually. To realize such coordination, it might be challenging to modify and upload the necessary data for the software which is used by facilities. Although the proportion of such an electronic care records might not be high currently, such coordination will play a key role in widening the use of this system.

Third, evaluation of the usefulness of this system should be done when most facilities in the community join the system and after the unreconstructed or unrealized functions of the system

described above are implemented. Currently, we cannot evaluate the system completely.

5. Conclusion

We constructed the system and operated it at a very few facilities with limited functionality. Experiments to examine more facilities with real-time information sharing and exchange of information with other surveillance systems are urgent challenges. Therefore, we cannot evaluate its usefulness until those goals are achieved.

6. Acknowledgement

7. Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

8. Ethical considerations

Data used for this system constructed and operated for this study were aggregated and de-linked from personal information related to residents: these are anonymous data. Therefore, no ethical issues are posed by these data for this study. Moreover, we did not analyze or show the entered data to the system by facilities at all in this study. Therefore, this study did not treat any information in the system.

9. References

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