Remote training of field teams: research portraits in times of pandemic.

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The Global Health Network

Published on: Jun 15, 2023
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21428/3d48c34a.e46d2d1a
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Introduction: Conducting research in low- and middle-income countries is already a challenge, even more so in emergency situations. What seemed like a science fiction movie was happening and was widely broadcasted in real time. The covid-19 pandemic had been declared and suddenly life was put on pause, with varying restrictive measures impacting all areas of life. This report describes some of the challenges experienced when conducting public health research in this context.

Methods: In Argentina, we were launching a clinical trial in tuberculosis, while in Cameroon and Tanzania, two studies in the area of household air pollution. The restrictions struck at the stage of starting the training of the field teams in the three studies. After the initial paralysis waiting for the new ethical guidelines for research in emergency situations, we were forced to quickly re-engineer the training processes of the health teams and community health workers involved in the studies. We used distance learning platforms to hold the training sessions, carried out simulations of the processes for recruitment, consent forms and data collection using mobile phone applications, organized on-line trouble shooting with the field teams via WhatsApp and daily remote data monitoring using specific web-based data collection software. All data logistics and document filing were reorganized under a contingency plan designed in accordance with the rules and requirements of each country.

Results: The study in Argentina began recruitment in November 2020, 3 months after the original starting date, and is currently completing the required sample size of 440 patients. The two studies in Africa (1500 households in Cameroon and 477 in Tanzania) were completed in July 2021 and manuscripts submitted or prepared for submission.

Comment: Conducting research in Argentina, Cameroon and Tanzania during the pandemic was initially distressing, then challenging, and in the end very rewarding. It offered the opportunity to apply digital technology innovative methods for remote training and data monitoring, shorten distances and bring together research teams working in different contexts, revealing a great capacity to adapt to the changes.