Getting Everyone in the Picture

Solving the Problem of Limited Cause of Death Data with Verbal Autopsy

WHO Verbal Autopsy Reference Group

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Acknowledgments

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies Data for Health (D4H), Health Metrics Network (HMN), INDEPTH Network, Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Australian National University, India National Institute of Medical Statistics, International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research (ICDDR), US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Federal University of Minas Gerais, Ghana Health Service, Ifakara Health Institute, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, National Institute of Health Research Indonesia, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute, Ohio State University, Thailand Ministry of Public Health, The University of Queensland, UCL Centre for International Health and Development, Umeå University, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), University of Alexandria, University of the Witwatersrand, Uttar Pradesh Center for Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health
Purpose

1. **Orient high-level decision-makers** to the problem and how Verbal Autopsy can help.

2. **Provide the basics of Verbal Autopsy** in the context of routine civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) and health systems.

3. **Describe the benefits of a Verbal Autopsy** system integrated into CRVS and health systems.
How can we prioritize, allocate resources, or track progress when we see only part of the picture?
Verbal Autopsy can give us a fuller picture of mortality.
Verbal Autopsy Gets Everyone in the Picture

29% of deaths occur in health facilities

71% of deaths occur at home

Source: Navrongo, Ghana Health and Demographic Surveillance Site, 2015
Verbal Autopsy is a structured interview with the caregivers of the deceased that can be used to determine the most likely cause of death.
Verbal Autopsy...

**Is...**

+ A structured interview with caregivers of the deceased and diagnosis of likely cause of death.

+ Useable at the population level through aggregated data that provides good population-level measures of causes of death in the community.

+ The only option available for determining causes of death in settings without physician certification.

**Is not...**

- Accurate at the individual level.

- A replacement for proper physician-certified cause of death.
Who benefits?

**People’s Health**

- The only reliable source of cause of death data for deaths outside of health facilities
- Enables planning and assessment of program impact using more complete, representative data at national and subnational levels

**National Government**

- Enables reporting on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that require cause of death data
Who benefits?

Civil Registration & Vital Statistics (CRVS)
+ Improves CRVS system coordination

National ID system/Population Register
+ Ensures voter rolls are purged of those who have died
+ Ensures pensions are no longer paid to deceased individuals
Causes of Death in CRVS systems

Death notification and registration

- Cause of death information can be collected as part of death registration, OR
- Can be collected separately and forwarded to the civil registration agency or to a national statistics office for tabulation

Methods for determining causes of death

- Autopsy by medical examiner or coroner to determine and report on cause of death
- Medical certification using the WHO International Form of Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD)
- Hospital/medical facility discharge data
- Verbal Autopsy
- Other health reporting (e.g., community nursing reports)
- Lay reporting

Standardized reporting for mortality statistics

- Underlying cause of death selected and coded in alignment to rules and principles of the International Classification of Disease (ICD) using either full ICD or the Start-Up Mortality List (SMoL)
How Verbal Autopsy Works

- 20 to 30 minutes to interview using tablet computer or smartphone
- Data automatically uploads to central level
- Cause of Death available quickly once central level has data
Verbal Autopsy Needs to Be Integrated with CRVS

1. Community key informant motivates the family to notify the death

2. Family informs the local authority

3. The local authority:
   - Enters the data in a tablet application and an unique ID is assigned to the record
   - Registers the death in the system
   - Provides a death certificate/burial permit to the family

4. All data are transmitted to a central server and stored in the CRVS database

5. A central server pushes a notification to the health facility to conduct the VA.

6. The health facility receives a notification in the tablet with the contact details prepopulated in the questionnaire.

7. Interviewer collects the data for the VA using a tablet

8. VA results are uploaded to the cloud and linked to the CRVS record.

Information is stored in the cloud.
An Example of Verbal Autopsy and CRVS Integration

1. Health worker notifies death to civil registrar
2. Health Sector notified of death
3. Health worker conducts verbal autopsy
4. Data processed Centrally
5. To vital statistics

Death occurs
Several factors drive the cost of a Verbal Autopsy System

**Primarily:** Will the Verbal Autopsy system be implemented on a representative sample or universally? What scope and scale are most cost effective for country needs?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Considerations</th>
<th>All deaths</th>
<th>Sample of community deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of clusters required</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of interviewers</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost of setting up the VA system</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
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<td>↓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of VAs required for a specific accuracy</td>
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<td>=</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operational feasibility</td>
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<td>=</td>
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Several factors drive the cost of a Verbal Autopsy System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Considerations</th>
<th>Small clusters</th>
<th>Big Clusters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy given the same number of VAs</td>
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<td>↑</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of interviewers</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost of setting up the VA system</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proximity to households</td>
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<td>↓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Representativeness</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>=</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of VAs required for a specific accuracy</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>=</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunity to piggy back on other programs</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Several factors drive the cost of a Verbal Autopsy System

Other major cost drivers:
- Opportunity to ‘piggy-back’ on existing surveillance systems
- Training and refresher training
- Supervision
- Payment death informants
- Transport costs
- Purchase and maintenance of mobile devices for data collection
- Central IT capacity and data management
Benefits of Verbal Autopsy
Track Trends in Causes of Death

Example

Age-sex-time standardized mortality rates by broad cause categories ascertained by InterVA-4, Agincourt HDSS

Source: Kabudula et al (2014); Two decades of mortality change in rural northeast South Africa. Global Health Action; 7 (26556)
Compare Trends Across Countries

Example

Malaria mortality rates from Verbal Autopsy data processed by InterVA-4, by site, age group and period at 20 INDEPTH Network sites

Source: Streatfield et al (2014); Malaria mortality in Africa and Asia: evidence from INDEPTH health and demographic surveillance sites. Global Health Action; 7 (25369)
Inform Health Resource Allocation

Example

Resource allocation without Verbal Autopsy data

Resource allocation with Verbal Autopsy data

Source: District Health Plans, Morogoro (Tanzania), 1996 & 1998
3.1 Reduce the maternal mortality ratio
3.2 Reduce under 5 child mortality
3.3 End epidemics of AIDS, TB, Malaria and NTDs
3.4 Reduce premature mortality from NCDs
3.9 Reduce deaths from hazardous chemicals, pollution, etc.
3.d Strengthen country capacity for early detection of global health risks
SUMMING UP
A nationally representative Verbal Autopsy system integrated with CRVS:

- **Offers data crucial to saving peoples’ lives** with better planning and more accountability;

- **Creates information** never before available; and

- **Benefits multiple stakeholders** and agencies at national and subnational level.