

Let's interpret cause of death data better

By James Addy

— *Dr Sankoh*

A NEW approach to the interpretation of undetermined cause of death data in communities using the InterVa computer model or software has been introduced to participants at a three-day workshop in Accra.

The participants numbering 25 were from Uganda, The Gambia, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Vietnam and Germany

The workshop, organised by INDEPTH Network, a health and demographic surveillance research institution in collaboration with Umea Centre for Global Health Research in Sweden equipped participants with information on the InterVa computer model to be able to keep track of mortality patterns in their respective countries.

The InterVa computer model processes mathematically verbal autopsy data and indicates what is the most likely cause of death.

Dr Ousman Sankoh, Executive Director of INDEPTH Network urged health researchers to embrace the InterVa computer model to enhance the quality of verbal autopsy data interpretation.

He said there is the need to establish as accurate as possible the cause of death of people who died at places other than hospitals to help health policy planning and research.

"Many deaths take place in our communities and at times we cannot tell what for instance killed a brother or sister who was not taken to the hospital," he said.

Dr Sankoh said in the interpretation of cause of death data, the InterVa computer software could be used to

provide answers which would help doctors to compare and also validate their findings.

He said there are often reported cases of maternal and child death, drowning, murder among other occurrences in communities and society should be able to establish what actually killed such people.

Dr Sankoh explained that the InterVa computer software which provides answers to the problem of the cause of undetermined deaths does not depend on individuals but systems.

He said the software does not also do away with the professional judgement of doctors but compares data and validates their results.

Dr Sankoh said about 6,000 children under five years die yearly and there is the need for researchers to get to the root of such deaths especially in rural areas.

Dr Ayaga Bawah, Deputy Executive Director of INDEPTH Network said there exists a proportion of deaths in communities whose causes are difficult to determine and the interval software would help to give a reliable clue to such deaths.

Mr Martin Adjuik of the Navrongo Health Research Centre said verbal autopsy has been part of the Ghana Vitamin A supplementation trial which started in 1989.

He said under the project funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), children were given doses of Vitamin A supplement which helped them to survive.

Mr Adjuik said the Navrongo Health Research Centre collected causes of death data alongside the Vitamin A supplementation trials and also research on bed



◆ Dr Sankoh

nets.

Professor Peter Byass of Umea University said the InterVa model software would help health professional to tell the most likely cause of death.

"Once the cause of death could easily be determined, precious time of physicians would be spared for them to attend to other issues".

Prof Byass said the InterVa model would also assist in determining the immediate and also underlying causes of deaths.

It will help to explain the disease processes of public health significance which led to a death, he said.

Prof Byass said individual conclusions may be useful but patterns of mortality are particularly important.