

PROTECTING COMMUNITY HEALTH AT LARGE EVENTS

Background

The Loddon Mallee Public Health Unit (LMPHU) works to keep our community safe and well. In March 2024, LMPHU responded to a serious gastroenteritis outbreak at the Esoteric music festival. The outbreak was caused by a rare and antibiotic-resistant strain of *Shigella sonnei*.

The Challenge

- 7,500 patrons attended the event
- Illness began in staff during setup and spread to patrons once the festival commenced
- 358 people reported symptoms. 87 people were tested and confirmed to have the infection, and of these 62 people were confirmed as multi-drug resistant *Shigella*. Drug resistance makes it harder to treat the infection.
- The event was in a remote location with limited medical services, poor mobile coverage, and extreme heat conditions
- Risks included inadequate sanitation, food safety issues, potential for ill people to swim in a communal lagoon, and heat wave conditions

Interventions

LMPHU worked closely with councils, health services, event organisers, the Department of Health (DH) and the Local Public Health (LPHU) network to rapidly contain the outbreak and protect the community.



Key actions included

- Supported environmental health teams to co-ordinate on-site assessment of food, waste, sanitation, and water facilities
- Public health controls – isolation advice, cleaning schedules, infection control measures
- Communication – Chief Health Officer alert, local messaging, direct advice to organisers and volunteers
- Case tracking – combining medic team reports, hospital data, and laboratory confirmation
- System strengthening – building regional emergency protocols, communication networks, and council engagement

Potential Outcome/Impact

The Esoteric Festival outbreak response demonstrated clear public health impact and long-term value for regional preparedness. Despite over 300 individuals reporting illness, the outbreak was rapidly contained through coordinated on-site controls, preventing further spread among the estimated 7,500

attendees and avoiding additional strain on local and regional hospitals two hours away in Bendigo and Ballarat.

Lessons learned were systematically captured through debriefs and shared across agencies, ensuring they informed future emergency planning. Importantly, outbreak insights were integrated into the Buloke Shire Community Emergency Risk Assessment (CERA) review in November 2024, embedding key risks such as, extreme heat, and mass-gathering health risks into local event planning and emergency management priorities. At the end of the festival, participants dispersed to locations throughout Victoria and Australia. Collaboration between the LMPHU, DH and the LPHU network ensured minimal secondary cases and ongoing transmission.

Immediate Outcomes Included

- increased compliance by festival organisers with food safety, sanitation, and infection control requirements
- volunteers and staff gained greater awareness of exclusion protocols when symptomatic
- councils were better equipped to enforce permit and inspection processes

Lessons Learned

- The Esoteric Festival outbreak reinforced the importance of strong local public health capacity to identify, manage, and prevent health risks at large events. Several key lessons emerged:
- Communication systems are critical: Medical surge capacity is essential: Infrastructure underpins prevention
- Extreme weather must be factored into health risk planning

- Compliance and accountability matter
- These lessons have informed updated protocols, council expectations of event organisers, and LMPHU's broader role in regional emergency preparedness. They also highlight how place-based public health units can translate outbreak response into systemic improvements, reducing the likelihood and impact of similar incidents in the future.

Why it matters

Local public health units provide intelligence, collaboration, and capacity that helps agencies assess risk, respond quickly, and prevent negative outcomes. The Esoteric Festival case shows that having local expertise and established partnerships on the ground makes a critical difference in keeping our communities safe.



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