Can a Twitter-based reporting tool improve foodborne illness tracking?

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Foodborne illness is a serious and preventable public health problem, affecting one in six Americans and costing an estimated $50 billion annually. As local health departments adopt new tools that monitor Twitter for tweets about food poisoning, a study from Washington University in St. Louis is the first to examine practitioner perceptions of this technology.

The study, "Evaluating the Implementation of a Twitter-Based Foodborne Illness Reporting Tool in the City of St. Louis Department of Health," led by Jenine Harris, associate professor at the Brown School, was published recently in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

Harris and her co-authors interviewed St. Louis Department of Health employees involved in food safety following St. Louis' adoption of the HealthMap Foodborne Dashboard and implementation of the Food Safety STL website and Twitter handle (@FoodSafetySTL). They interviewed epidemiologists, environmental health specialists, health services specialists, food inspectors and public information officers.

While participants worried the dashboard would increase workload and be hard to implement, once it launched, they found it easy to use and felt it had relative advantages over existing reporting methods.

"Strengths of the dashboard implementation included easy integration into existing systems, no notable increase in workload, and the

facilitation of pro-active communication with constituents," Harris wrote. "Challenges included concerns about greater workload and a lack of trust in, and capacity to use, social media."

The study is the first to examine practitioner perceptions of the implementation of a new technology in a local health department, Harris said.

"In light of our results," she wrote, "our primary recommendation for similar implementation projects is the development of a clear and comprehensive plan to educate and involve stakeholders about social media and the dashboard prior to implementation."

  More information: Jenine Harris et al. Evaluating the Implementation of a Twitter-Based Foodborne Illness Reporting Tool in the City of St. Louis Department of Health, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2018). DOI: 10.3390/ijerph15050833

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