



Summary

Date: 2023-05-02

Reference number: 3.1.1-2021-1221

RiR 2023:9

National communicable disease control

– not adapted for large scale spread of disease

Summary

The overall conclusion of the Swedish National Audit Office (Swedish NAO) is that national communicable disease control contributes to effective disease prevention. However, several aspects of the disease control need to be strengthened in order to increase the capacity to deal with future outbreaks and spread of disease with potentially serious consequences for society. At the same time, the audit shows that communicable disease control is a complex area: an effective way of managing an outbreak of an infectious disease in one situation may prove to be ineffective in another situation. In addition to the Swedish NAO's recommendations, collaboration and efficient cooperation among stakeholders at national, regional, and local level is absolutely essential for providing effective disease control.

Government has not allowed scope for effective communicable disease control

In its governance over time, the Government has not allowed scope for disease control that is effective both under normal circumstances and in a situation of large-scale spread of disease. The Swedish NAO takes a positive view of the fact that the Government has initiated several urgent assignments and inquiries in the area of communicable disease control, but also notes that the majority of these

assignments and inquiries were only initiated once a pandemic was already a reality.

Cohesive national responsibility for infection prevention and control could boost disease control efforts

The audit indicates that the coordination of communicable disease control at the Public Health Agency of Sweden functions well under normal circumstances. However, the Swedish NAO notes that the joint national responsibility infection prevention and control, shared by the National Board of Health and Welfare and the Public Health Agency of Sweden, leads to unclear governance. Infection prevention and control is a fundamental part of preventive efforts to combat infection and it is the assessment of the Swedish NAO that cohesive national responsibility can support effectiveness in work on disease control.

Communicable Diseases Act limits effective management of disease control

Swedish NAO finds that the Communicable Diseases Act limits effective management of disease control. The Act has not been adapted to the reforms aimed at consolidating disease control and public health, nor is it designed for large-scale contagion. The review of the Communicable Diseases Act by the Inquiry on constitutional readiness focuses mainly on new legal regulation for future pandemics. However, the audit suggests that the regulatory framework needs to be reviewed in its entirety. In view of the ongoing overhaul, the Swedish NAO has opted to limit recommendations on changes to the Communicable Diseases Act to refer to the supervision of disease control.

Public Health Agency of Sweden should draw on experience from the pandemic to further develop national disease control

The Public Health Agency of Sweden should draw on the experience from the COVID-19 pandemic to further develop disease control, including follow-up and knowledge support. Development needs, for example in terms of systems and data, are extensive. Furthermore, both the Public Health Agency of Sweden and the National Board of Health and Welfare should have the legal prerequisites to collect and manage data in order to achieve more effective disease control. Finally, the Swedish NAO cannot assess whether resource utilisation with regard to disease control activities of the Public Health Agency of Sweden is efficient. This is partly due to the fact that the authority has not separately reported its disease control costs until 2022.

Recommendations

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Government:

- Give an appropriate agency overall responsibility for infection prevention and control. Infection prevention and control forms an important part of the work on preventive disease control and this should be reflected in central government governance.
- Clarify regulation on the supervision of disease control for the regions. A proposal for clearer regulation on supervision can be submitted within the scope of the review of the Communicable Diseases Act by the Inquiry on constitutional readiness.
- Investigate the legal prerequisites of the Public Health Agency of Sweden and the National Board of Health and Welfare for collecting and processing healthcare data in order to achieve more effective disease control.

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Public Health Agency of Sweden:

- *Concerning the responsibility for coordinating disease control*
Draw on the legal expertise that has been established at the Public Health Agency of Sweden to build a structure and channels for legal knowledge support on communicable disease control issues. The purpose of the structure and channels for legal knowledge support is to promote more effective disease control efforts.
- *Concerning the task of monitoring and developing disease control*
Use lessons learned and experience from the COVID-19 pandemic to further develop disease control. Development needs, for example concerning systems and data, are extensive. In light of the fact that communicable disease control forms a large part of the Public Health Agency's operations, the Agency should also develop the work it has begun to monitor and analyse the costs of disease control activities. The aim should be to achieve more effective disease control and better preparedness for future outbreaks and spread of disease with potentially serious societal consequences.