Respiratory Infection in Volunteer Group Working Abroad Case Study

Have you even beenon a mission trip with your church or youth group? Each year, thousands of Americans travel to other countries, or to disaster areas within their own country (such as New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina), where they pitch in to perform all kinds of ordinary, but important, manual tasks, such as simple construction, renovation, or flood cleanup.

For one such mission trip, a group of church volunteers from Pennsylvania and Virginia traveled to a church in Nueva San Salvador. A total of 35 volunteers went to El Salvador, traveling in three groups between January 3 and February 20, 2008. El Salvador didn’t turn out very well. Twenty of the volunteers came down with a serious respiratory disease resembling acute influenza within 3 to 25 days of arriving in El Salvador.

To try to diagnose the disease and figure out how the patients had acquired it, public health officials began investigating the activities of all the volunteers, those affected by the illness as well as those unaffected. The volunteers had helped clean indoor and outdoor renovation sites, install electrical and plumbing components, build additional rooms onto the church, replace the roof, and excavate the septic tank. In addition, each of the mission groups had taken one day off during their stay to visit a local beach or lake.

* What diseases might be included in the differential diagnosis for this condition?
* When considering possible diseases, would the geographical location have any influence on your choices?