Epidemic Alert and Response

Epidemics and newly-emerging infections are on the move as never before, threatening the health of people around the world and affecting travel and trade in the global village. Globalization, climate change and the growth of megacities are increasing the potential for rapid spread. New industrial processes, deforestation and urban sprawl bring humans and animals in closer contact and allow animal pathogens to “jump species” more easily.

Many of these epidemics, such as meningitis, recurrently challenge health systems, particularly in countries with limited resources. Others, such as influenza, have an increasing potential to create major pandemics. The return of yellow fever threatens large cities and new continents. International travel, trade and tourism are all affected by emerging and epidemic disease threats, which could be used to cause intentional epidemic (bioterrorism).

A Global Strategy

The World Health Organization (WHO), through its exceptional global network encompassing six regional and numerous country offices, works with well-recognized partners to significantly contribute to global health security. With global partnership as its foundation, WHO’s work is built around three strategic directions within the global framework of the International Health Regulations and an effective communications network.

The International Health Regulations (IHR) are a unique regulatory framework agreed by the international community to support global health security. The IHR are currently being revised to better respond to the distinct challenges of the 21st century.

Improve preparedness

Efficient alert and response systems are needed in all countries. Focusing particularly on resource-poor countries, WHO supports the strengthening of national capacity for alert and response through a multidisease or integrated approach. It provides tools, expert assistance and carefully-tailored training to enhance skills in laboratory diagnosis and field epidemiology. The WHO Biosafety Programme develops norms and standards for laboratory safety as well as for the safe transport of infectious substances. A WHO Office in Lyon, France, is dedicated to further improving laboratory and epidemiology capacity in developing countries.

Contain known risks

WHO develops and strengthens specific global surveillance and response networks for influenza and other diseases such as meningococcal meningitis, plague, viral haemorrhagic fevers (Ebola, Lassa) and SARS. For example, the Global Agenda for Influenza builds upon WHO’s global network of national influenza laboratories and collaborating centres. Laboratory surveillance networks are in place for anthrax and viral haemorrhagic fevers. WHO also provides technical and operational support for field interventions and mass vaccination campaigns against meningitis and yellow fever.

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