1. Introduction

These "best practices" were developed as a result of the Director General’s initiative on International Health Security, including the implementation of the International Health Regulations (2005). They provide the basis for high-level agreement on guiding principles to improve WHO's event management process for acute public health risks and reflect the responsibilities of all parts of WHO.

From 2001-2006, WHO verified with affected Member States 1 281 events of international concern. In each case WHO offered technical assistance, and in more than 100 events, the affected countries have taken advantage of WHO’s proven expertise and experience in the deployment of international teams, and engagement of WHO Collaborating Centres, GOARN and technical networks. The results and benefits have been shared between COs, ROs, and HQ.

Today, WHO leadership of international epidemic alert and response enjoys unprecedented recognition reflected most compellingly in the agreed revision of the IHR (2005). In addition to reinforcing WHO's central role, however, the Regulations bring much greater scrutiny on, and will demand greater consistency in, WHO's event management actions.

2. WHO’s role in international health security and epidemic alert and response

Epidemics place sudden and intense demands on national and international health systems, expose existing systemic weaknesses, impact on morbidity and mortality, and disrupt economic activity and development.

The world requires an international alert, preparedness and response system to rapidly identify and contain public health threats to international health security, reduce panic and minimize disruption of trade, travel and society in general.

The revised IHR (2005) provide the global legal framework to address these needs through a collective approach to the prevention, detection, and timely response to any public health emergency of international concern. The IHR (2005) come into effect in June 2007, and establish new and explicit obligations for WHO.

In particular, increased responsibilities and greater scrutiny will apply to how WHO gathers, shares, assesses and disseminates information regarding potential threats to international public health, and provides assistance to Member States to control and contain outbreaks. Under the new Regulations, the Director General is responsible for the Organization's adherence to the IHR (2005).

WHO’s capacity to act dynamically in rapidly evolving situations is critically dependent on close collaboration, transparency and engagement of all levels of the Organization in a collaborative process consisting of risk assessment, decision-making and response. This process requires:

(i) more timely and enhanced epidemic intelligence
(ii) real-time exchange of situational reports and other data for decision-making
(iii) enhanced information management and risk communications
(iv) risk analysis and decision support
(v) action planning and coordination of response activities
(vi) technical partnerships to support international health security.
This collaborative risk management process is essential to ensure that WHO meets its obligations under the IHR (2005). The process has already been developed and proven in practice but must now be reinforced and formalized. This will require development of policies, strategic approaches and standardized operating procedures which draw on the respective and complementary strengths of headquarters, regional and country offices.

Adherence to these processes, including accountability for the handling of confidential information, timeliness in sharing information, and the technical quality of risk assessments, decision making and response will ensure WHO continues to provide leadership in international health security.

3. Epidemic alert and response - recommended operational practices

1. Consistency

- WHO employs a single, reproducible process for event identification, verification and assessment using common standards and thresholds for action
- Each Regional office should establish a responsible office for event identification, verification, assessment and operational support, to:
  - Record all communications between WHO Contact Points and NFP's
  - Identify and follow-up with national authorities on events that could threaten international public health
  - Participate in the collaborative risk assessment process, using the same assessment criteria and indicators across the Organization
  - Routinely share information with parallel structures in the Organization, and create consistent information products
- WHO should deploy an Organization-wide event management system (EMS), to:
  - Record and share access to event information
  - Facilitate participation in the risk assessment process
  - Coordinate WHO response activities
  - Coordinate the WHO's public statements and media activities
  - Coordinate production and clearance of information products
  - Support aggregate reporting.

2. Timeliness

- Critical alert, verification and response functions must be maintained at all times. Staffing levels for these functions should ensure that individual absences do not stall the daily work. The Organization must also develop the surge capacity to maintain the functions outside normal working hours, including over weekends and holidays.
- Responsible officers must be experienced in assessing complex technical and political issues and should be assigned to the event management process on a full-time basis, with functional TORs.
3. Technical Excellence

- Risk assessment and support to countries must draw upon the full depth of technical resources within the Organization, and the support offered to Member States should reflect all the expertise embedded in offices at the national, regional and headquarters levels. Informed risk assessment requires threat-specific expertise, expert knowledge of the affected Member State's capacity to respond, expert knowledge of surrounding or otherwise linked states, and expert knowledge of the international context.

- The Organization should share basic event information and expert judgments in a secure forum where the most accurate possible depiction of an event can be referenced.

4. Transparency and Accountability

- The IHR will bring unprecedented scrutiny of WHO’s actions. The IHR Secretariat is mandated to report on the Organization's activities as a whole and will prepare comprehensive reports to the World Health Assembly on a regular basis.

- WHO should establish internal standards and expectations to meet this mandate and establish clear procedures about how to protect Member States' confidentiality as provided under the Regulations while ensuring that international health security is protected and how to record WHO's activities in an auditable manner in the Event Management System.