

Message from the Regional Director



In today's globalized world, characterized by an increasing interdependence, the intricate link between human health and collective security is in sharper focus than ever before. The vital connection between ill health of peoples, and the danger it poses in the international, national, economic, community and personal context must be recognized because it has emerged as one of the most important subjects of our times.

When epidemics and pandemics race across distances, they present a threat to global health security. Easy, frequent travel as well as large scale trade give ample opportunity for disease to effortlessly and speedily cross borders. The germ needs no passport and so defies detection by traditional state machinery. A single infected person on board a commercial flight can transfer a deadly virus to another continent in a matter of hours and trigger a pandemic. Our highly mobile and interconnected world is obviously becoming a vulnerable one.

This was dramatically brought home in 2003 when SARS traveled across the world. We have seen one single case of polio bring about its re-emergence in countries that had virtually eradicated the virus. Epidemic-prone diseases, new as well as the re-emerging ones, human emergencies, bi-terrorism, climate change and environmental degradation hold the potential to turn into international public health emergencies.

The growing interdependence of health and security is best brought out by the global spread of HIV/AIDS. Not only has it shown the capacity of a disease to destabilize economies and societies and to push fragile states to the brink of failure, it has also shaken faith in the power of science to combat new microbial threats. In 2000 the UN Security Council for the first time in its history discussed a health issue-AIDS- as a threat to peace and security.

The South-East Asia Region has had to deal with the fallout of both disease and natural disaster on human health. Six countries of the Region were devastated by the Tsunami in December 2004. Indonesia has major earthquakes every other day. India, Thailand, Myanmar and Nepal are overwhelmed by floods every year. The threat of avian influenza continues to stalk not only the Region but the whole world. If the virus mutates and human-to-human infection follows, the world will have a pandemic on its hands.

The continuing spread of HIV/AIDS in our part of the world has to be arrested. Our Region carries the highest burden of TB cases among all the WHO regions. This is a Region where, in many Member countries, nearly 50% of the population do not have access to sanitation or safe drinking water. Climate change and environmental degradation is impacting human health and death due to tobacco use is on the rise.

Against this backdrop, the theme chosen for World Health Day 2007 is International Health Security. This is an occasion, not only to consider lurking threats, but more importantly, to build the first line of defence against health risks. The World Health Day slogan 'Invest in health, build a safer future' is a call to all partners to come together to prepare and respond to health dangers.

Governments, international organizations, business and civil society will need to focus on the health challenges ahead and work collectively to meet them. To tackle health threats investments are required at many levels. Collaboration between countries to improve preparedness and response, information sharing, strengthening of public health systems and surveillance require attention and money.

The revised International Health Regulations (2005) unanimously adopted by the World Health Assembly will come into force from June this year. Their implementation will help build and strengthen effective mechanisms for outbreak alert and response at national and international levels.

To see agreed goals translate into real results, investments big and small have to be made in human health. Sometimes, all it takes is distribution of mosquito nets (US\$ 10) to reduce the spread of malaria or as little as US 10 cents to ensure clean drinking water solutions that can last a family one entire month. Efforts to highlight the health benefit of washing hands to prevent diarrhoea are as critical as programmes that call for vast resources. Every country and every community must invest in health and build capacity to prevent new and existing threats.

WHO with its partner governments and stakeholders is working to strengthen health systems by integrating primary health care services. Public health initiatives which work to protect a population from falling prey to ill health are important considering the fact that in many countries 40% of deaths from illness can be prevented. Yet, investment in public health remains low.

However, this huge task cannot be tackled by the health sector alone. Foreign policy makers, finance strategists and other organs of governments need to bring health on their agenda. This shared effort can go a long way in realizing the WHO objective of "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health". Let us work together to translate goals into tangible results.

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INVEST IN HEALTH, BUILD A SAFER FUTURE

World Health Day is a significant worldwide event of the World Health Organization. Since 1950, it has been held each year on 7 April to raise awareness of key global health issues. This year's theme is international health security.

The theme of World Health Day and of the World Health Report 2007 is "international health security". This theme was selected to highlight the fact that, in a globalized world, health issues increasingly present new challenges that go far beyond any single national border and have an impact on the collective security of all the people of the world.

Through increased collaboration among developed and developing countries, the international community will be better prepared to deal with key cross-border public health issues and in turn to help make the world more secure.

Source: World Health Organization (<http://www.who.int/world-health-day/2007>)

KEY MESSAGES FOR WORLD HEALTH DAY 2007

1. Threats to health know no borders.

In a globalized world, emerging epidemics cross national borders and threaten our collective security. Threats to health and security are multiplying and moving faster than ever before.

2. Invest in health, build a safer future.

Every country must invest in health and build its capacity to prevent new and existing threats by strengthening public health systems. Only then can we build a safer future. Implementation of the International Health Regulations (IHR) from June 2007 will help to build and strengthen effective mechanisms for outbreak alert and response at national and international levels.

3. Health leads to security; insecurity leads to poor health.

HIV/AIDS is a powerful example of how interdependent health and security have become. HIV/AIDS threatens the stability of entire nations and regions. Unlike many other diseases, AIDS affects the most productive members of society.

Protecting the health of people and the security of all those affected requires political commitment at the highest level and close collaboration between governments, international organizations, civil society and the private sector.

4. Preparedness and quick response improve international health security.

Threats to health security are many and varied: they include sudden shocks to health and economies from emerging diseases, like SARS and avian influenza, humanitarian emergencies, bioterrorism and other acute health risks. Tackling the health effects of these threats involves working collectively to improve preparedness and to respond effectively when they occur. The shortage of safe drinking water and its impact on health and security after hurricane Katrina, and the tsunami in Asia, clearly demonstrate the importance of advance preparation and the ability to respond quickly.

5. The World Health Organization is making the world more secure.

The security of all countries depends on the capacity of each to act effectively against health threats. WHO's response to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian flu clearly demonstrated the power of coordination and the importance of international health security. International collaboration among developed and developing countries, and increased focus on information-sharing and the strengthening of public health systems and surveillance, are key to containing outbreaks of infectious diseases. The threats remain; we must continue to invest and build. WHO's leadership is essential.

Source: World Health Organization (<http://www.who.int/world-health-day/2007>)

Important topics in the RD's message

Avian Influenza: The H5N1 Influenza A virus has the potential to trigger a pandemic. The bird flu is a contagious disease that commonly occurs in birds and sometimes in humans and pigs and can be rapidly fatal.

Polio: Even one polio infection can trigger an epidemic, back when the Global Polio Eradication Initiative was launched, wild poliovirus was endemic in more than 125 countries on five continents, paralyzing more than 1000 children every day. Today, polio is endemic only in Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Niger, Afghanistan and Egypt.

HIV/AIDS: The challenge is to arrest the spread of HIV-infection which has reached pandemic proportions. As the directing and coordinating authority on international health, the World Health Organization (WHO) takes the lead within the UN system in the global health sector response to HIV/AIDS.

Malaria: The Malaria parasite is becoming resistant to old and new drugs. Malaria is an infection caused by a parasite and carried from person to person by mosquitoes. It is preventable and curable but kills more than one million people-most of them young children living in Africa-each year.

Tuberculosis: Multi drug-resistant TB threatens the success of control programmes. Anti-tuberculosis (TB) drug resistance is a major public health problem that threatens the success of DOTS, the WHO-recommended treatment strategy for detection and cure of TB, as well as global tuberculosis control. Essentially, drug-resistance arises in areas with poor TB control programmes.

Chemical Incidents: Use of hazardous chemicals threaten human health. The WHO PCS Chemical Alert and Response Team identifies, alerts, tracks and where appropriate coordinates a response to chemical incidents and emergencies on a global basis. The aim of this is to strengthen capacity in countries, particularly developing countries and those in economic transition, to deal with chemical incidents and emergencies.

Climate Change & Health: Global warming will increase disease outbreaks and malnutrition. Climate change has a range of complex interlinkages with health. These include direct impacts, such as temperature-related illness and death; the health impacts of extreme weather events; the effect of air pollution in the form of spores and moulds.

Emergency Preparedness & Response: Emergency preparedness helps mitigate the health consequences of disasters. Epidemics and pandemics can place sudden and intense demands on health systems. They expose existing weaknesses in these systems and, in addition to their morbidity and mortality, can disrupt economic activity and development.

Primary Health Care: Primary health care is vital for national and international health security. Care which provides integrated, accessible health care services by clinicians who are accountable for addressing a large majority of personal health care needs, developing a sustained partnership with patients, and practicing in the context of family and community.

Public Health Initiative: Some public health initiatives can prevent nearly 50% of premature deaths. At the meeting on "Future Directions in Public Health - Calcutta and Beyond" held at SEARO in December 2003, Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, had promised to intensify efforts in strengthening public health in the Region, with particular emphasis on the development of public health workforce through educational programmes relevant to the specific needs of the Region.

Safe Water: Unsafe drinking water causes a majority of communicable diseases. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which include cutting the percentage of people who lack access to potable water by half and reducing child mortality by two-thirds by the year 2015.