WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
EUROPE

Towards health security

A discussion paper on recent health crises in the WHO European Region

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Edited by: Gerald Rockenschaub, Jukka Pukkila and Maria Cristina Profili

Abstract

This discussion paper examines recent threats to health security in the WHO European Region from communicable diseases, natural disasters, large-scale accidents, conflicts and complex emergencies and the potential future challenges from climate change. It reviews the lessons learned from past experience, the new framework offered by the revised International Health Regulations (2005), the need for strengthening health systems to manage crises and the importance of international partnerships for health security.

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Foreword

Health security is not a new topic, but it has recently taken on a new urgency for policy-makers and therefore for WHO. The WHO Eleventh General Programme of Work, 2006–2015, which sets out the broad directions for the future work of WHO, identifies strengthening global security as a key priority, supporting an integrated approach to a society-wide response to emerging and new threats to health, including disaster and conflict situations.

Health and security are the topic of World Health Day 2007 and the theme for a forthcoming world health report. During 2007 – the year when the revised International Health Regulations enter into force – the focus will be on global health security and on risks and dangers to health that have international dimensions. The world health report 2008 *– the year that marks the 60th anniversary of WHO and the 30th anniversary of the Declaration of Alma-Ata, the first international declaration to underline the importance of primary health care – will focus on primary health care and its role in strengthening health systems, addressing the more personal dimension of health security.*

In the European Region, a discussion paper on health security was presented to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe at its fifty-sixth session in September 2006. This initiated further analysis and strategic considerations of how to support Member States in strengthening preparedness measures for health threats with security implications and to ensure an effective and comprehensive health system response. The Regional Committee endorsed six strategic directions in the resolution on the future of the Regional Office towards 2020, one of which mandates WHO to lead the international response on health security in the European Region.

Health security is an intersectoral issue, and well-established coordination mechanisms involving government and nongovernmental institutions are essential at the country level. At the regional level, WHO collaborates closely with partners such as the European Commission and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control to address the international dimension, to build capacity, to compile and share evidence and information and to ensure the cross-border interoperability of preparedness planning and health security response plans.

All these discussions have emphasized the importance of strengthening the preparedness of national health systems. Key recommendations include strengthening stewardship, implementing health systems preparedness planning as a continuous process with a multihazard approach, establishing sustainable crisis management and health-risk reduction programmes in health ministries and establishing multisectoral coordination mechanisms. The programmes should be in charge of health system preparedness planning and managing health crises so that the health sector can be ready to take a leading and coordinating role and technically guide other sectors facing a health crisis.

There is much at stake. Health crises and the human suffering they cause could jeopardize the progress made in strengthening health systems towards sustainable development and the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. This is why preparedness planning is key.

This publication maps some of the major threats to health security in the WHO European Region and the challenges they represent for health systems. It provides some key facts and lessons from experience that policy-makers can put to good use. It is one step towards defining strategic options for fostering health security in the European Region.

A health system that anticipates the health needs of people affected by health crises can respond to them effectively, save lives and stop events from escalating into security crises. At the regional level, WHO will continue to work with its Member States to understand better the complexity of health security in the regional context and, through further consultations, explore effective ways to enhance health security. This publication contributes to that work.

Nata Menabde
Deputy Regional Director
WHO Regional Office for Europe

Executive summary

A key priority

Health security is a key priority for WHO's Member States. It is the subject of World Health Day 2007 and of a forthcoming world health report. The year 2007 is when the revised International Health Regulations enter into force, and the focus is on global health security and on risks and dangers to health that have international dimensions. The WHO Eleventh General Programme of Work, 2006–2015, identifies strengthening global health security as a key priority for WHO's future work. The WHO Regional Committee for Europe, during its fifty-sixth session in September 2006, reviewed a discussion paper on health security and passed a resolution on the future of the Regional Office, endorsing six strategic directions for WHO's regional work towards 2020. One of these directions mandates WHO to lead the international response on health security in the European Region.

A way towards health security in the WHO European Region

This publication builds on the health security debate initiated at the fifty-sixth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in 2006. It aims to stimulate further consultations with Member States on how to support them in strengthening their preparedness measures against health security threats and in ensuring

- conflicts and complex emergencies
- potential future challenges from global changes, particularly climate change.

The publication does not cover some specific aspects of health security, such as the socioeconomic determinants of health or the risk of accidental release of biological and chemical agents or radionuclear material or their deliberate use with the intention to harm human health.

A case study approach

Several concrete examples document experiences from recent health crises in the WHO European Region in the public health areas mentioned above.

Some generic lessons learned emphasize the importance of engaging in health systems preparedness planning to respond to any potential health and security crisis and show clearly that weak and unprepared health systems can hamper the effective management of health crises.

Important concepts – such as strengthening stewardship, implementing health systems preparedness planning as a continuous process with a multihazard approach, establishing sustainable crisis management and health-risk reduction programmes in

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