



Laboratory technician identifies the type of virus using WHO standard influenza kits during influenza virus identification workshop held from 31 October to 2 November in Rabat, Morocco. Photo: Greta Isac

2 November 2017 – WHO conducted a 5-day workshop in Rabat, Morocco, on influenza virus identification and handling mechanisms to enhance the capacities of national influenza centres in the Eastern Mediterranean Region for timely and effective detection of seasonal and pandemic influenza.

The workshop was attended by laboratory managers and technicians from 16 countries in the Region. It focused on detection and identification of seasonal influenza virus sub-types, using cell culture and hemagglutination – steps that are essential for identifying viruses to make vaccines.

National influenza centres work closely with sub-national laboratories and WHO collaborating centres to regularly collect and analyse virus specimens in order to identify the type of influenza virus circulating in and out of season. WHO's Regional Office of the Eastern Mediterranean had conducted an assessment of these centres and influenza laboratories in 2015–2016, which revealed that some lack the necessary capacity for virus isolation in cell culture, and for antigenic characterization of human influenza viruses - capacities that are fundamental for early detection and recognition of influenza viruses of epidemic and pandemic potential.

“By establishing virus identification and handling mechanisms, and through timely detection of unknown viruses, national influenza centres can be effective in limiting the spread of seasonal and pandemic influenza in the Region, and around the world,” said Dr Mamunur Malik, Manager of the Infectious Hazard Management unit at WHO’s Health Emergencies Programme at the Regional office in Cairo.

Influenza viruses cause respiratory illnesses in humans, and in some animal and bird species. They circulate seasonally, and evolve continuously, requiring regular monitoring and analysis. A pandemic occurs when an influenza virus which was not previously circulating among humans, and to which most people do not have immunity, emerges and transmits among humans.

The workshop was held at the National Institute of Hygiene in Rabat from 30 October to 2 November, and was conducted by WHO technical officers and experts from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta.

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