

The World Health Organization today ended a three-day meeting of international experts focusing on communication during a human influenza pandemic. The Second International Meeting on Pandemic Influenza Communications was attended by over 100 representatives from over 50 countries, other UN agencies and other organizations. It was opened jointly by His Excellency Dr Hatem El-Gabaly, Minister of Health and Population of Egypt, and Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

The meeting was held in Cairo because of the demonstrated commitment of the Government of Egypt to providing timely and transparent information to the people of Egypt, and the world, about human cases of avian influenza. “Egypt has set the standard for transparency,” said Dick Thompson, team leader for WHO’s Outbreak and Pandemic Communication group, and an organizer of the meeting. “During a pandemic, vaccines will be limited and late, and antivirals will be in short supply everywhere. The strongest public health tool available will be official health advice that is trusted. Although no one knows when a pandemic will start, we do know that preparedness will reduce the harm from a pandemic. The work that Egypt is doing now is building a reservoir of trust which may be needed during the pandemic.”

Deliberations focused on social mobilization, messages before and after a pandemic, and networking.

The role of social mobilization as an integral component of effective pandemic influenza preparedness and response was widely endorsed by participants. It was agreed that planning for, and adopting appropriate behaviours before, during and after a human influenza pandemic can help reduce illness, death and socioeconomic disruption. In order to enable countries to develop social mobilization strategies, participants agreed to review existing social mobilization assessment tools which countries could then use to conduct gaps analyses. Once completed, the analyses will help determine what resources are required to develop and implement social mobilization campaigns at a country and community level. A framework for social mobilization which will include guiding principles, check lists, and specific guidance for appropriate behavioural interventions will be developed within the next year.

Messaging and nomenclature were two critical issues discussed during a special workshop session. These issues will be crucial for addressing the initial confusion that is likely to arise in a global emergency such as a pandemic. Responding with consistent messaging will help public health officials deal with uncertainty, avoid confusion and maintain public confidence at a critical time. The meeting also considered the need for standardization of avian and pandemic

influenza terminology and descriptions.

Key recommendations from the meeting included formulating a priority list of topics for which messages could be developed and developing checklists to assist countries with planning communication activities. The meeting also endorsed a glossary of avian and pandemic influenza terms. The participants recognized that although a considerable amount of progress was made at the meeting, much more detailed work will be required in order to achieve the objectives of the meeting, among which were to assist countries with their preparation. To this end, the meeting recommended the formation of a messaging advisory group to follow up activities and carry forward the recommendations. Mrs Denise Carter Taylor, who chaired the workshop session, said, “The messaging and nomenclature workshop and the recommendations which emerged were seen as a critical input for helping countries to ensure that communication remains an integral component of human influenza and avian influenza preparedness planning.”

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