

EDITORIAL

"Emerging Infectious Diseases- Global Alert - Global Response". When the term 'alert' is used it indicates an emergency and if we do not respond adeptly, catastrophe becomes imminent. The World Health Day theme of 1997 very aptly draws the attention of both, the providers as well as the consumers of health care facilities, to gear up and engage the entire health machinery to combat these emerging infectious diseases. The problem with which we are confronted is not only the emergence of nearly 30 or more infectious diseases, which have surfaced in the recent past but also the resurfacing or re-emergence of certain diseases, which were believed to have declined or been eliminated.

Some of these new diseases, which have emerged in many parts of the world can be short listed as :-

- Fatal respiratory viral disease
- A variant of Creutzfeldt Jacob Disease (CJD) resembling Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE)
- HIV infections /AIDS
- Ebola Haemorrhagic Fever
- Legionnaires' disease
- Haemolytic Uraemic Syndrome by E. Coli 0157 - H7
- Lyme disease
- Hepatitis C and E
- New form of Cholera by Vibrio Cholera 0139
- Emerging food borne diseases
- Emerging zoonoses
- Other sexually transmitted diseases.

These are the diseases which were either not recognised or not known adequately earlier and seem to have emerged in the past twenty years. To this we can also add the re-emergence of certain diseases in the western world, where their incidence as well as prevalence had declined considerably. Some of these disease are:-

- Tuberculosis, on the rise partly owing to its association with HIV/AIDS.
- Malaria
- Plague
- Diphtheria
- Dengue fever
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Yellow fever
- Viral encephalitis
- Cholera

Along with these emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases, there is also a great concern arising on account of the microbial resistance to the frequently used antibiotics.

The myth about total prevention/control /eradication of diseases like malaria, plague, yellow fever, tuberculosis, cholera, typhoid and many others in many industrialised regions of the world, is far from reality. The more advanced countries of Europe and America and are now regretting their complacency, because the diseases which had declined to extremely low levels are coming up again as a stark reality.

We have to face the fact that infectious diseases are a common threat, which demands urgent attention, especially at a time when people throughout the world are being brought close together by international travel and trade. Communicable diseases respect no frontiers. We have to rise to the occasion and work in close co-ordination globally to control them.

The logo of the World Health Day, 1997 depicts a world wide partnership of countries, non-governmental organisations, international organisations and individuals.

It also ensures a rapid detection and effective containment of emerging and other communicable diseases. The logo symbolises the merging of three important global monitoring systems. These bring together specialised laboratories and disease surveillance systems from all countries and feed information electronically to the worldwide web (WWW) and other international electronic and print media.

The three monitoring systems are:

- 1) WHO system of collaborating centres, specialised laboratories and institutions with expertise in diagnosis and epidemiology of infectious diseases.
- 2) a) WHO NET for monitoring antimicrobial resistance
b) Programme for monitoring gonococcal antibiotic susceptibility.
- 3) International Health Regulations (IHR) and their upto date revision.

The WHO has very rightly emphasised the relevance and importance of emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. This phenomena reflects the constant struggle of micro - organisms to survive primarily by finding breaks in the barriers which normally protect human beings from infections. Such breaks may result from high risk human behaviour, failure of disease detecting systems, failure to control mosquitoes and other vector carriers of disease, breakdown of water and sanitation systems, and deforestation, which forces wild animals closer to human settlements in search of food. These breaks have developed rapidly in just a few decades. At the same time, interest in infectious diseases has waned, and resources for their detection and control have decreased. Because such diseases appeared to pose a declining threat in many developed countries, funds for their control were channelled to efforts against other problems. Experts on infectious diseases perhaps retired or left the field and students turned to more rewarding subjects than viruses and bacteria. In short, the infrastructure for control of communicable diseases began to crumble. Complacency, sometimes, can be highly detrimental. The false sense of security developed against communicable diseases in the western world led to the emergence and re-emergence of infectious diseases. Now the world seems to be becoming one again, so far as the infectious diseases are concerned and all of us are having the feeling that perhaps we are back

to square one. Need of the time is to direct all the concerted efforts in one direction i.e prevention, early detection and control of communicable diseases. For this, we need a global policy and partnership and to work in unison for the common good of mankind, irrespective of the fact to which part of the world we belong. The task is not easy, but certainly not impossible. We can still take lessons from the strategy evolved to eradicate small pox, which is perhaps one of the biggest achievements in medical history. What we really need is a proper understanding of the epidemiology of infectious diseases. We have to view them in their current perspective and at the same time, the approach for their prevention and control has to be based on recent technology and global partnership.



DR. ASIFUZZAMAN KHAN
(Chief Editor, IJCH.)