

6. Zika: collaborative work across disciplines

On 1 February 2016, WHO Director-General Margaret Chan declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in response to the Zika virus and observed increases in neurological disorders and neonatal malformations.

The decision was based on advice from the IHR Emergency Committee upon reviewing reported clusters of microcephaly and Guillain-Barré syndrome following outbreaks of Zika virus disease in Brazil since late 2014, and in French Polynesia between 2013 and 2014.

As of 13 July 2016, Zika virus transmission has been documented in 62 countries and areas worldwide, including 18 countries and areas in the Western Pacific Region. There are also reports of sexual transmission. Based on research, there is now scientific consensus that Zika virus is a cause of microcephaly and Guillain-Barré syndrome.

The Division of Health Security and Emergencies and the Division of Pacific Technical Support are working closely in strengthening the regional response, especially in addressing a number of Zika virus disease outbreaks in the Pacific.

Technical guidance is being provided by the Malaria, other Vectorborne and Parasitic Diseases team as well by the Health Systems, the Expanded Programme on Immunization, and the Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health teams in the Regional Office.

Epidemiologists, entomologists and risk communication specialists have been deployed to support the response in eight countries and areas. Laboratory equipment and vector-control supplies have been provided to six Pacific island countries and areas to support national responses.

One of the biggest challenges throughout the response has been communicating uncertainty, especially in situations with a heightened perception of risk and weak levels of scientific evidence. Efforts have been directed towards maintaining trust by explaining what is not known, as much

as what is known and what is being done to further understanding. Health authorities have acknowledged uncertainty about the likely duration of the outbreak and are preparing the public for the likelihood of a prolonged crisis.

WHO will continue to support the strengthening of health systems to identify and manage cases of Zika virus disease and their potential complications, as well as vector-control activities aimed at individuals and communities to reduce the density of the mosquitoes that carry the virus in hopes of halting its spread. ■



A pregnant woman discusses concerns about Zika virus disease during a prenatal care visit at Vaiola Hospital in Tonga.