4. Preparing for the next pandemic

The Western Pacific Region is considered an epicentre for the emergence of novel influenza subtypes with pandemic potential. Over the past decade, multiple new avian influenza A(HxNy) virus strains that have the ability to cause illness in humans have been detected in the Region, including A(H5N1), A(H7N9), A(H5N6) and, most recently, A(H7N4).

WHE continues to support countries to review national pandemic influenza preparedness plans and update approaches based on the evolving context. A two-tiered approach, as proposed by APSED III, has provided the foundation for planning discussion: in reviewing, testing and updating pandemic response plans, countries also assessed the availability of structures and resources to allow response plans to be implemented effectively.

At the end of April, Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Viet Nam came together to revisit preparedness based on lessons learnt from past events and anticipate future threats.

One of the critical lessons from the influenza A(H1N1) pandemic of 2009 was that many countries had prepared for a pandemic of high mortality. Their preparations were not necessarily suited for a milder event. Now countries are adopting a more flexible approach that can be scaled up or down based on the clinical severity of the infection. This approach requires countries to develop plans that can be adjusted based on national risk assessments. To help countries gauge the severity of an influenza pandemic and tailor their response, WHO recently released the Pandemic Influenza Severity Assessment (PISA) tool.

Following the framework for action outlined in APSED III, Member States also continued to strengthen generic health security capacities. These capacities will serve them through all kinds of outbreaks and public health events, including the next pandemic. For example, many Member States have established emergency operation centres for command and coordination during emergencies. They have also continued to develop capacities in epidemiology, risk assessment and risk communication.

Pandemic influenza threats will continue to be a top priority for WHE. Efforts will be redoubled to ensure the Region is well prepared for the next influenza pandemic.