Background

Achieving international public health security is one of the main challenges arising from the new and complex landscape of public health. Shared vulnerability implies shared responsibility. Strengthening countries’ disease surveillance and response systems is central to improving public health security in each country and globally. WHO’s unique public health mandate, worldwide network, well-established global partnerships and long-standing experience in international disease control constitute an exceptional asset for supporting countries in strengthening their capacity and for achieving international health security. Since the revised International Health Regulations (IHR) came into effect in June 2007, the world now has the necessary global framework to prevent, detect, assess and provide a coordinated response to events that may constitute a public health emergency of international concern. This complex landscape of public health requires a response to public health emergencies through proper, timely and trusted communication.

Achievements

Prior to the launch of IHR, a range of advocacy materials were prepared by WHO, including a pocket guide on “Basic Information for National Policy-Makers and Partners”. Developed initially in English, it was translated into various regional languages.

Information materials have also been produced on a range of infectious diseases. These are communicable diseases that may constitute a public health emergency. Clear messaging included what the public should be aware of, who to report to and also what policy-makers need to consider when disseminating information and dealing with the public.

Two rapid containment training sessions, each with an average of 25 participants, were held in Bhutan and Maldives, in which the role of risk communication was addressed through a range of exercises. In addition, a two-day risk communication workshop for media and health personnel in Maldives was conducted in November 2007. Risk communication was also a module incorporated into the three-month Field Epidemiology Training held in Delhi in 2007, and has been a feature of various workshops on communicable diseases. A daily media monitoring of rumours is an avenue through which surveillance and response teams carry out their activities, which in turn strengthens IHR.

Gaps and needs

Risk communication is still at an infancy stage among some Member countries. While it is acknowledged as a necessary tool, there is a greater need for advocating its importance. Building national capacity in this area is vital, especially to reduce panic and maintain trust while containing the spread of diseases.