Top 10 Threats to Global Health in 2019

HIV, anti-vaxxers, dengue fever and weak primary health care make the World Health Organization's list of priorities.

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The World Health Organization (WHO), which operates in more than 150 countries, is launching a five-year plan to address the major threats to global health. Part of that strategy entails identifying those threats.

The plan's ultimate goal is to see 1 billion more people getting access to universal health coverage, 1 billion more people protected from health emergencies and 1 billion more people enjoying better health and well-being.

Which specific issues will WHO experts focus on in 2019? According to its website, the following are its top 10 threats to global health:

Air Pollution and Climate Change: WHO lists air pollution as the greatest environmental risk to health, noting that 9 out of 10 people breathe unclean air. What's more, the major cause of air pollution—burning fossil fuels—is largely responsible for climate change, which is linked to deaths from malnutrition, heat stress and diarrhea.

Noncommunicable Diseases: These include cancer, diabetes and heart disease. According to WHO, when combined, these diseases cause nearly 70 percent of all deaths worldwide (about 41 million people).

Global Influenza Pandemic: Experts say the question isn't whether we will ever face another deadly global flu strain, but when? Also: How hard will it hit, and will we be prepared?

Fragile Settings: People struggle for basic survival in places beset with famine, drought, wars and population displacement.

Antimicrobial Resistance: As more bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites become resistant to current medications, they also become larger threats to humans. You've probably read articles about drug-resistant gonorrhea, but tuberculosis—which kills about 1.6 million people across the globe each year—is developing resistance to the most effective first-line med to treat it.

Ebola and Other High-Threat Pathogens: Ebola might not appear in U.S. headlines as much as in past years, but outbreaks still occur in Africa. WHO lists pathogens and diseases including Ebola, Zika and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) as serious threats. WHO and its partners have been called upon to create plans in 2019 to prepare for potential outbreaks.

Weak Primary Health Care: “Primary health care is usually the first point of contact people have with their health care system,” writes WHO, adding that primary health care can meet the majority of a person’s needs throughout his or her life. Yet most countries lack basic primary health care facilities. What’s more, universal health coverage will not be possible without such facilities.

Vaccine Hesitancy: In a direct rebuke to the anti-vaxxer movement, WHO stresses the importance of getting proper vaccinations—including against measles and cervical cancer. (The vaccine against human papilloma virus, HPV, prevents cervical, anal, penile and other cancers).

Dengue: This mosquito-borne virus is traditionally associated with the rainy season of countries such as Bangladesh, but it is spreading to less tropical locations. The flu-like symptoms of dengue fever can be lethal, and, according to WHO, about 40 percent of the world is at risk.

HIV: Despite the major advances in testing and treatment, nearly a million people die of HIV-related illness each year. WHO points out that girls and young women represent a group at increasing risk of contracting the virus—they account for 25 percent of new HIV cases in sub-Saharan Africa, despite making up only 10 percent of that region’s population. One way WHO hopes to counter these statistics is to promote self-testing.

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