

# Public Health Emergencies: Need more Focus?

**Benny PV**

Chief Editor, Kerala Medical Journal\*

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World Health Organization has defined the term Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) in the International Health Regulation (IHR), 2005 as “an extraordinary event which is determined, as provided in these Regulations: to constitute a public health risk to other States through the international spread of disease; and to potentially require a coordinated international response”. This definition implies a situation that is serious, unusual or unexpected; carries implications for public health beyond the affected State’s national border; and may require immediate international action. The serious public health events that endanger international public health may be determined under the regulations of public health emergencies of international concern (PHEIC). PHEIC is a legally binding international instrument on disease prevention, surveillance, control, and response adopted by 194 countries.<sup>1</sup>

WHO Director-General has got the responsibility to determine whether an event is within this category and requires the convening of a committee of experts, the IHR Emergency Committee. This committee advises the Director General on the suggested measures to be promulgated on an emergency basis, known as temporary recommendations. These temporary recommendations include health measures to be implemented by the State Party experiencing the PHEIC, or by other State Parties, to prevent or reduce the international spread of disease and avoid unnecessary interference with international traffic. The Emergency Committee also gives advice on the determination of the event as a PHEIC in situation where there is inconsistency in the assessment of the event between the Director-General and the affected country/countries. Also this committee continues to provide advice to the Director-General throughout the duration of the PHEIC, including any necessary changes to the recommended measures and on the determination of PHEIC termination. At least one member of the Emergency Committee should be an expert nominated from the territory the event arises.<sup>2</sup>

Known risk factors of public health to be controlled and contained in an effective way, which constitute the most powerful ways to improve international health security. These risks form the route cause for the potential public health emergencies. Both generic preparedness measures at national and international levels and specific preparedness measures relating to surveillance, risk reduction, and response and containment are required to overcome the public health emergencies. The existing international disease control programmes, addressing infectious diseases as well as food-safety and environmental safety, are essential contributors to WHO global alert and response systems.<sup>3</sup>

Spilling of chemicals used in coal mining into the Elk River in West Virginia in January, the governor declared a state of emergency the same day. When the H1N1 influenza virus was discovered in 2009, US President declared national public-health emergency. In both cases, people were willing to cooperate with government orders (don’t drink the water, speed up vaccine production) in order to get an impending health threat under control.

The Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network has been bringing agreed standards to international epidemic response through the development of Guiding Principles for International Outbreak Alert and Response and operational protocols to standardize various epidemiological, laboratory, clinical management, research, communications, logistics support, security, evacuation and communications systems.<sup>4</sup>

Public health emergency declaration has got some criticism too, the Massachusetts Governor’s unusual step in March to declare a public-health emergency in order to control the state’s recent opioid-addiction epidemic, wherein, 40 people had died from heroin overdoses in four months. This sort of unusual steps

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## Corresponding Author:

Dr Benny PV, Chief Editor, IMA Kerala Medical Journal; Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Sree Gokulam Medical College, Kerala, India. Email: drbennytm@gmail.com

raises questions about what exactly constitutes a public health emergency.

Emergency public health powers, are traditionally reserved for infectious disease outbreaks, natural disasters, or acts of terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Whether widespread injuries due to poisoning or road traffic accidents be viewed as public health emergencies is a relevant question to be considered. In developing countries like India, 1000 people per day die due to tuberculosis. Can such conditions be similarly categorized?

On 8 August 2014, Ebola outbreak in West Africa has been declared as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). The possible consequences of further international spread are particularly serious in view of the virulence of the virus, the intensive community and health facility transmission patterns, and the weak health systems in the currently affected and most at-risk countries were the factors that leads to inclusion of Ebola as PHEIC.

In the case of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Corona-Virus (MERS-CoV) , the sixth meeting of the Emergency Committee convened by the Director-General under the International Health Regulations (2005) held on 16 June 2014,<sup>6</sup> unanimously declared that the conditions for a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) have not been met. The Committee also noted that recent investigative findings increasingly support the hypothesis that camels are an important source of exposure to MERS-CoV in the community.

Public health emergencies will come again and again, because most of the known risks for public health emergencies are still not in control. It is necessary, not to lose focus on public health issues focused by World Health Organization. Many public health issues faced by developing countries are inducing very high mortality and are not properly addressed. Focused action is needed in the midst of all public health emergencies.

## END NOTE

### Author Information

Dr Benny PV, Chief Editor  
IMA Kerala Medical Journal;  
Professor, Department of Community Medicine  
Sree Gokulam Medical College, Kerala, India.

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