

# World Health Organization – The Question of Creating a Framework for Dealing with the Rapid Spread of Contagious Diseases

## Introduction

The first topic that the World Health Organization (WHO) will be discussing is the question of the creation of a framework in order to combat the spread of infectious diseases. This issue has come to the forefront due to the recent H1N1 virus and avian flu scares, which have had severe economic and political side effects. The spread of these diseases is crippling to security in the globalized world because it spreads rapidly and cannot easily be combatted using traditional security measures. The spread of infectious diseases is unique because it leads to a strong sense of panic in a short amount of time and on a global scale. Governments not only have to control the infection, but the panic as well. Infectious diseases are extremely significant to the international community as a whole, and this issue requires the cooperation of all nations in order to provide security for the citizens of the world.

## History

Two weeks after H1N1 became a topic of international concern, 64 people in Mexico (the country of origin) were dead, 2,600 were ill, and the economy was crippled. Long-term effects were equally worrying. Tourism, Mexico's third largest source of revenue, decreased until hotel occupancy was reported as being in the single digits.

However, Mexico was not the only country affected. The "swine flu" created a truly global panic. Disorganization and ineffectiveness in response to the disease was exacerbated by a panicked populous. This made it much more difficult for governments to organize and make effective decisions to contain the infection. Instead, government responses to the panic were less than reassuring. The Chinese government quarantined at least 71 Mexican citizens who had no symptoms of the virus; the European Union (EU) and the WHO recommended the culling of pigs that were initially responsible for the spread of the virus. In the United States President Obama declared swine flu to be a national emergency. International travel significantly decreased as people feared a pandemic.

Amidst this panic, countries began to devote their efforts towards the development of a vaccine to stop the spread of this disease. However, the production of vaccinations and their distribution was disorganized at best. The pressure to protect citizens is intense during any pandemic, and more than 90% of the world's capacity to manufacture influenza vaccines is concentrated in Europe and North America. However, infectious diseases are far reaching and need global cooperation rather than each individual country trying to find a solution. Many industrialized countries have negotiated contracts in their pandemic preparedness plans with vaccine companies to supply the pandemic

vaccine once it has been developed, but developing countries have no such signed contracts and no financial resources to secure vaccines.

This problem comes into direct correlation with the WTO's TRIPS agreement. This agreement is concerned with the protection of intellectual property on an international scale. TRIPS gives patents on pharmaceutical products for a minimum of twenty years, meaning that no other company has the ability to produce the product or an imitation of the product during that time frame. There are some flexibilities incorporated into the agreement that extend certain exemptions for under-developed countries. However, there are still barriers to the utilization of these exemptions such as international stigma from developed countries.

### **Possible Solutions**

Because pandemics are intrinsically international, cooperation from all nations is necessary to form a solution. A framework would have to be created that facilitates the pooling of resources such as medicines and medical personnel necessary for production and distribution of treatment.

Certain codes of conduct would also have to be considered at the time of a pandemic in order to better facilitate the development and equal distribution of treatment. Governments would have to work towards quelling panic at the onset and making reasonable and coordinated efforts in terms of protecting citizens.

### **Points of Contention**

From the beginning of a pandemic, the biggest problem is the growth of debilitating panic. Panic in the population makes the situation difficult for governments to control and ultimately makes the pandemic more difficult to contain as people begin to move to the "safest" location. In turn, panic among governments exacerbates the panic of the population as well as cutting off the possibilities of cooperation as "infected" nations become isolated by the global community. What kind of framework can be developed in order to quell this initial onset of panic?

Once panic has been overcome, problems occur in the coordination of research efforts and resources. In times of pandemic countries become self-interested, but this goes against the very nature of pandemics and limits their efficient regulation. How can you convince nations to seemingly sacrifice their own self-interest in favor of collective security?

The second point of contention concerns the TRIPS agreement, which provides patent rights to pharmaceutical companies and makes it increasingly difficult for developing countries to finance the purchase of life saving drugs. How can you

create a framework that creates equality in distribution while at the same time respecting previous agreements?

### **Resources**

<http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2009/05/25/h1n1-trends-lessons/>

- lessons learned from Mexico's treatment of the H1N1 pandemic

<http://www.cmaj.ca/content/181/3-4/123.full>

- a more detailed review of some of the challenges in vaccine production

[http://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/whatis\\_e/tif\\_e/agrm7\\_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/agrm7_e.htm)

- basics of the TRIPS agreement

- Watch the movie Contagion to get some ideas