Preventing and Controlling Pandemic Flu and Other Infectious Diseases

WHY ARE INFECTIOUS DISEASES A THREAT TO OUR NATION’S HEALTH?

Emerging or resurging infectious diseases, such as dengue fever; yellow fever; and malaria are of growing concern to health professionals because there is no specific medication for prevention or treatment of the diseases. One third of the world’s population is infected with tuberculosis (TB), which kills nearly two million people each year. Of the estimated 9.4 million new TB cases each year, nearly half-a-million are resistant to at least two of the most effective anti-TB drugs.

An estimated 1.1 million persons in the United States are living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection. Nearly one-quarter of them (21 percent) are undiagnosed, and, each year, more than 56,000 people are newly infected. More than half (53 percent) of these new infections occur in men who have sex with men (MSM).

An estimated 1.4 million people in the United States live with chronic hepatitis B, and up to 3.9 million people live with chronic hepatitis C. Many do not know they are infected.

Nearly two million people acquire infections while in U.S. hospitals each year and almost 100,000 of them die as a result. The estimated health care costs associated with health care-acquired infections ranges from $28 billion to $45 billion (in 2007 dollars).

Pandemic Flu Poses a Particularly Alarming Threat:

- The 2009 novel Influenza A (H1N1) virus infected an estimated 61 million people in the United States, and resulted in 274,000 hospitalizations and approximately 12,000 deaths.
- The regular seasonal flu kills 36,000 Americans and hospitalizes 200,000 yearly. A severe pandemic flu outbreak could result in 90 million Americans becoming sick, 2.2 million deaths, and major economic losses.

Measures for Preventing and Controlling Infectious Disease Are Antiquated and Inadequate:

- The Institute of Medicine (IOM), Government Accountability Office (GAO), and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) have found America’s public health system to be fundamentally unprepared to respond to major modern health threats.
- The federal and state governments should continue to improve public evaluations of preparedness and pandemic planning on a state-by-state basis.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO BETTER PREVENT AND CONTROL INFECTIOUS DISEASES?

- Increase and Better Coordinate Federal-State-Local Government and Private Planning and Preparedness. The government should take the lead on preventing disease, and all jurisdictions should work together to create policies that follow best infection-control practices. Government at all levels should engage the private health care system and communities in their plans and efforts. Government should be transparent about their actions and held accountable for protecting the public.
- Prepare for Mass Emergencies. Before a disaster occurs, measures must be established to care for a potential surge of patients, including creating alternative care sites, building regional health care coalitions, and recruiting additional health care personnel.
- Emphasize Prevention, Care, and Treatment for Chronic Viral Diseases, Including HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis. Addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic, hepatitis, and other
chronic viral diseases must include increased funding for research, treatment and care, as well as investing in proven prevention methods.

- **Enhance Research and Development of Vaccines and Public Health Technologies.**
  Our country’s research and development of new medical countermeasures must be modernized. We need to form public-private partnerships to attract investment, clear hurdles to approval of new products, and build the science base for future innovation.

- **Increase Childhood and Adult Vaccinations.**
  Vaccines are responsible for the control of many infectious diseases. Public health professionals and health care providers should utilize the new vaccine-coverage provisions in the Affordable Care Act and the development of electronic health records to ensure everyone receives vaccines on time, at no cost. All health care workers must receive recommended vaccines.

- **Modernize Disease Surveillance Systems.**
  Every health department and agency should be part of a surveillance system that is interoperable between jurisdictions and agencies.

**ENDNOTES**


7. Ibid.


