



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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to the

INTERCOUNTRY MEETING ON INTERNATIONAL HEALTH REGULATIONS (IHR):

INTRODUCTION OF THE REVISED INTERNATIONAL HEALTH REGULATIONS

Cairo, Egypt, 1–3 March 2004

Dear Colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the Intercountry Meeting on International Health Regulations to introduce the revised International Health Regulations. I would like to express my great appreciation to our colleagues from headquarters in Geneva who have been working very hard to enhance revision of the Regulations. I would also like to extend a special word of welcome to the national focal points for the International Health Regulations, who are participating in this meeting. Finalizing revision of the Regulations, as well as future implementation of the Regulations, will depend heavily on your unflagging efforts and continued commitment.

Dear Colleagues,

Health and sanitation aspects of international traffic have been of concern to the WHO since its inception. The World Health Assembly, in its 4th session in 1951, recommended that all governments should “improve sanitary and environmental conditions, especially in and around ports and airports”. The current International Health Regulations, adopted by the Health Assembly in 1969, comprise the only internationally binding legislation on the reporting of epidemics, with the purpose of ensuring maximum protection against the international spread of diseases with minimum interference with world traffic. The International Health Regulations and the previous *International Sanitary Regulations* have, for more than 50 years, provided WHO Member States and the transportation industry with a regulatory framework to support public health security by preventing the international spread of human diseases that can be carried by aircraft, ships and ground transport in the form of infected passengers or crew, insects, rodents or contaminated cargo or goods.

As you realize, the current version of the International Health Regulations, as a global tool for disease surveillance and public health protection, has major constraints. In the current version countries are obliged to report cases of cholera, plague and yellow fever only, as smallpox, louse-borne typhus fever and relapsing fever are not on the list of diseases subject to the Regulations. Information is entirely dependent on official notification by the affected country to WHO. Moreover, there is no defined mechanism for collaboration between WHO and the country in which an infectious disease with a potential for international spread is occurring. Another constraint is lack of effective incentives to encourage compliance by Member States. In addition, the current version does not clearly define the role of WHO in prescribing specific measures to prevent international disease spread. Meanwhile, the world is facing a number of challenges that can result in extensive spread of infectious diseases. Population movements are increasing, methods of food processing are changing, international trade is growing and serious disease pathogens continue to emerge. All these factors reaffirm that infectious disease events in one country are a potential concern to the entire world.

With these major constraints and challenges in mind, in 1995 the World Health Assembly adopted a resolution, WHA48.7, on the revision and updating of the International Health Regulations to ensure that they take account of current trends in the epidemiology of infectious diseases. Further, in 2001, the World Health Assembly adopted another resolution, WHA54.14, on global health security: epidemic alert and response, in which the revision of the International Health Regulations was linked to WHO activities in identifying, verifying and responding to health emergencies of international concern. In 2002, the Health Assembly urged Member States to enhance revision of the International Health Regulations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You will note that in the proposed revision of the International Health Regulations, the requirement of reporting on three diseases is being replaced by a requirement to notify “public health emergencies of international concern”, identified by certain criteria: seriousness, unexpectedness and potential for international spread. An important change proposed for the Regulations is the addition of a “real-time” process for dealing with international public health emergencies that could affect Member States and the transportation industry.

The key words are “public health emergencies of international concern” and “real-time”. In this regard, I would like to bring your attention to a resolution of the 50th Session of the Regional Committee in 2003 which endorsed the following definition of public health: *The science and art of promoting, protecting and/or restoring the physical, mental and social well-being of the people through prophylactic, diagnostic, therapeutic and rehabilitative measures, applied to human beings and their environment.* For the international health instrument to be effective, Member States must agree on a consensus definition of public health to avoid any ambiguity in interpretation or definition of “public health”.

WHO will ensure appropriate technical assistance for response to emergencies and will provide recommendations for necessary public health measures to prevent disease spread. These measures will be time-limited and will change as required to match the risk posed by an outbreak. Member States should have core capacities for rapid detection and response to disease events to prevent potential spread, thus minimizing the need for international control measures. The

revised International Health Regulations will also consider information coming from sources other than the official notification by the Member States. Under the revised Regulations, WHO will provide Member States with technical assistance, at their request, in taking the appropriate measures to investigate, control and contain the emergencies notified.

The ongoing revision of the International Health Regulations is being carried out in close collaboration with other key stakeholders: the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Maritime Organization, and industry associations like the International Air Transport Association, the Airports Council International and the International Shipping Federation, since their operations are affected by the requirements of the Regulations. WHO has now produced the first draft of the proposed revision, which is to be reviewed by national governments and international bodies during the coming few months. Based on this review, an amended draft will be submitted to an international working group meeting, planned for November 2004. The final draft will be presented to the Health Assembly in 2005 for adoption.

Dear Colleagues,

The International Health Regulations were created for the Member States of WHO and can only be adopted and implemented by them. The effectiveness of the Regulations as an international instrument depends primarily on the extent to which countries accept the legal framework and are able to work within it. Consultation with Member States on proposed technical amendments is important for sound revision of the Regulations and effective implementation in the future. A series of consultative meetings with selected Member States at country, subregional, regional and interregional levels are planned to finalize the revision process. As part of this process, this meeting has been organized to brief you on the proposed revision of the Regulations and the associated documents, to discuss issues that might be raised in relation to the proposed changes and to develop plans for developing national consensus on the proposed revision, as a step towards its endorsement by Member States and adoption by the Health Assembly.

In concluding I would like to thank you and to ask all of you to help ensure the utmost benefit from this meeting through sound discussions, exchange of ideas and clear planning for enhancing the revision of the International Health Regulations. I wish you all a successful meeting and a pleasant stay in Cairo.