

Editorial

Cooperation to Develop Health Security

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The means to safeguard the western way of living have a significant impact in the beginning of this third millennium. The world as we know it will be very different based upon decisions of some key leaders.

Most of the research and academic inquiry in this Journal is devoted to enhancing the quality and quantity of life through effective health communication intervention. Our implicit Hippocratic oath to “do no harm” with our published research, while exercising caution to beware of unintended consequences, is a central tenet of our publication. Most of us understand the implications of our research and the effects of our commission or omission of communication to be amongst issues of greatest consequence.

Despite the focus on health communication, one of the greatest risks that challenge the “world order” are the effects of war and the sequelae of human suffering and despair. Nonetheless, there are those in the field of medical journal publishing that profess medical journals have no right in discussing or meddling in questions related to war in Iraq.¹

As armed conflict is a risk factor of greatest consequence to millions of people today, it would be unconscionable not at least to contribute to the dialogue. Poverty, social inequality, education, and a variety of other social/economic/political factors have an even greater impact upon humankind than the microbes known to transmit disease.

We have lived for over half a century with the threat of nuclear weapons. Proliferation abounds with uncertainty over the development, ownership, and ability to deliver such weapons over long distances. According to the United Nations report, the current threat from Iraq does not appear to be based in possession of delivery systems with nuclear capability.

Similarly, it is unclear if other potential “weapons of mass destruction”—biological or chemical weapons—are harbored by terrorists who may have mechanisms to release them and threaten innocent civilians. It has always been possible for terrorists to develop microbes and chemicals from natural sources. Whether others might be developed by rogue states or “stolen” from inadequately protected foreign laboratories remains as uncertain as the evidence on the risk of exposure to anyone. Nonetheless, decisions to protect our “lives” have often been reduced to simple slogans, fear of the consequences of exposure to such weapons (e.g., the smallpox scourge), and even simple personal protective suggestions for harm reduction. (In February, 2003, residents of the USA were urged to buy duct tape and plastic sheaths.)

1. Mark Graczyński, Editor, Medical Science Monitor in *BMJ* vol. 326. 23 Jan 2003.

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If our principal goal is to combat biological terrorism or the spread of chemical entities, developing an effective first line global public health system of response with early detection, surveillance, communication, and appropriate treatment interventions is critical. The first step is in place as the World Health Organization has developed international public health regulations and a reporting system for its 192 members. However, this could be bolstered with an international network and system of national laboratories linked to medical and public health interventions. This would need to be a full-scale operation supplemented by contributions from and interaction with the private sector as well as nongovernmental organizations such as Doctors Without Borders.

In an era where microbes know no boundaries, we can embrace the current focus on the threat of biological and chemical weapons as a means to develop and strengthen a new Health Security. Detection, surveillance, communication, and treatment response must reflect 21st century science and execution. In addition to humanitarian values, global Health Security capacity is in the interest of the developed world, so that early warning systems can be in place and also serve as a type of insurance that could hinder the creation of resistant strains. This capacity could also enhance the fight to reduce the toll of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases as well as prepare the world for future non-communicable diseases of great proportion.

It of course, is idealistic to expect complex political and economic conflicts will be reduced to an issue of security where health of humankind would be of paramount interest. Regardless, we should attempt to advance health as a common interest for positive political, economic, and human impact, thereby contributing to stability and a safer world. If the world were to invest in health security at only a fraction of the cost of the military build up by the United States alone, we would ensure a healthier world for future generations.