

Maintain essential health services during COVID-19 response

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The World Health Organization today urged Member countries in South-East Asia Region to maintain essential health and accelerate resumption of disrupted health-care services, hit by the pandemic, as an integral part of the COVID-19 response.



“The pandemic has put immense strain on health systems across the South-East Asia Region. The previous disease outbreaks have shown that disruption to essential services caused by an outbreak can be more deadly than the outbreak itself. We must fast track efforts and do all we can to avoid that happening, while continuing efforts to break COVID-19 transmission chains,” said Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director WHO

South-East Asia Region, in a virtual meeting with Ministers of Health from the Region today.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, repurposing of health workers, cancellation of elective care, closure of outpatient services, insufficient personal protective equipment, and changes in treatment policy have significantly impacted delivery of essential services. Additionally, changes in health-seeking behavior, constrained physical access and financial hardship have also limited service uptake.

Countries in the Region have been developing and implementing innovative ways to overcome these challenges - leveraging the potential of telemedicine; developing novel supply chains and medicine dispensary options; and better engaging the private sector and communities. WHO issued guidance on maintaining essential health services in March and its update in June as a core part of the pandemic response which has been a critical part of the Region’s COVID-19 response.

“We must strengthen our evidence and knowledge base on how essential services can be maintained. We must continue to innovate, accelerate our efforts to sustain our gains while sharing our experiences and learnings and adapting policies to suit local contexts and transmission scenarios,” Dr Khetrpal Singh said.

Strengthening health system resilience with a focus on primary health care is key to maintaining and strengthening essential health services amid our new normal, the Regional Director said, adding, that the emergence and spread of COVID-19 has reiterated the critical importance of building strong primary health care systems able to withstand acute events while continuing to provide the services required to meet most people’s needs.

Communities must continue to remain at the center of the response, she said. Attention should be given to understanding the social impact of the pandemic and how it affects the health-seeking behaviour of

specially the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and their access to services.

“We must act with speed and scale to restore and maintain essential health services to protect our many gains in the Region. In the past few years, Member countries have been driving substantive and conclusive gains in health and well being in line with flagship priority programmes in the Region,” Dr Khetrupal Singh said.

A rapid assessment of 25 essential services carried out by WHO in May showed significant disruptions to essential health services across the world, including WHO South-East Asia Region. Routine immunization and supplementary measles and rubella campaigns were disrupted in eight of the Region’s 11 countries. Both outpatient and in-patient services for non-communication diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart diseases, cancer etc, have been greatly affected. The most affected service has been mental health, which is so critical in these difficult times.

Across the Region, family planning, antenatal care and institutional childbirth services have been reduced significantly, impacting our capacity to accelerate reductions in maternal and neonatal mortality, the Regional Director said.

Health system pressures, reduced service utilization, damaged supply chains and the potential for reductions in health spending could inhibit progress towards universal health coverage and weaken the battle against antimicrobial resistance (AMR). If case detection for TB drops by 50% over a period of three months, the Region could return to 2012 levels.

“Strengthening and maintaining essential health services has been one of the Region’s core priorities from the beginning of the pandemic and will continue to be a key area of focus. The health and well-being of the Region’s near 2 billion people is at stake, and with it the sustainable development of more than a quarter of the world’s population. Our challenge is indeed immense, but I am certain that together we can ensure that all people can access the services they need to stay healthy and productive throughout the pandemic and beyond,” Dr Khetrupal Singh said.

The Regional Director and the Ministers of Health are expected to review and further discuss essential health services at their virtual ministerial roundtable meeting next month during the Seventy-third Regional Committee Session of WHO South-East Asia Region.

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