

Pandemic Preparedness Plan Exercise Program

Module 4: Preventing spread of infection in the community

Introduction

The purpose of this tabletop exercise is to test through a facilitated discussion the awareness and operability of plans and procedures related to the planned response to pandemic influenza with the involvement of the agencies involved in that response.

These tabletop exercise materials are part of a series provided by WHO based on the WHO checklist for influenza pandemic preparedness planning¹. The materials in this module are designed to test elements of preparedness outlined in section 4 of the Checklist- Preventing spread of disease in the community.

These materials include a definition of the scope of the exercise, objectives the scenarios to be acted upon, questions for the controller/facilitator to pose and a general description of the actions expected as a result of those questions. The players in the exercise should only be given the scenario on the day of the exercise.

A tabletop exercise, while simulating an emergency situation, is a discussion guided by the exercise controller. There are no "real" actions carried out during the exercise. Players explain and discuss among the group how they would react to the scenario, but do not actually execute those actions.

There are no right or wrong responses during the exercise. There are no consequences for exploring alternative solutions as part of the discussion. The success of a tabletop exercise is determined by the full and honest participation of the players and the impact the lessons learnt during the exercise have on the revision and enhancement of plans, policies and procedures.

It is not unusual during the course of a tabletop exercise discussion to learn that important policies or procedures are not clearly defined, not familiar to all those involved, or simply less efficient than a procedure used by a different group. Events such as this should not be seen as a failure of any particular agency or group, but an opportunity for all involved to learn from the strengths of others.

The virus in the exercise is (A) HxNy.

Scope

As it is impossible to test all elements of any plan under all circumstances in a single exercise, the scope of these exercise materials is to facilitate an exercise based on the following:

Type of emergency: Pandemic Influenza

Location: Within the exercising Member State's borders.

Functions: Strategies for preventing spread of an influenza virus of pandemic potential in the community during pandemic alert and pandemic periods.

Participants: Focal points or decision makers from all entities involved in case investigation and treatment aspects of the pandemic plan. These individuals may include but is not limited to persons from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Transport, the military and emergency services sector, district health care managers, rapid response team members, media relations staff, clinicians, laboratory managers, non-governmental organizations, private practitioners, and community representatives.

Exercise Type: Tabletop exercise

¹ http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/influenza/WHO_CDS_CSR_GIP_2005_4/en/

Objectives

The main objectives of this exercise are:

1. To evaluate social mobilization strategies proposed for health education on personal and community hygiene during pandemic alert and pandemic periods.
2. To evaluate strategies for risk communication to the public.
3. To review strategies proposed for use of non-pharmaceutical interventions for limiting the spread of infection in the community during influenza pandemic alert and pandemic periods.
4. To review strategies proposed for use of pharmaceutical interventions for limiting the spread of infection in the community during influenza pandemic alert periods.

Scenario A

The WHO pandemic alert phase is 3. There are sporadic reports of human infection with influenza virus (A) HxNy within your borders and in the region. All cases to date have had close contact with infected poultry and/or close personal contact with infected persons. Your country will be entering the seasonal influenza period in three months.

It is suspected that some farmers are not reporting sick and dead birds. In urban areas, poultry vendors are experiencing a severe drop in business, even in areas that are not affected.

The media is criticizing the governmental response so far and are projecting that there will be chaos during the upcoming seasonal influenza period.

Scenario B

The WHO declared an influenza pandemic caused by the (A) HxNy virus four months ago. Human infection with influenza (A) HxNy has been confirmed in several patients from urban areas as well as in rural farming communities of your country.

Worried parents are keeping their children out of school in infected areas and companies are reporting that many staff are refusing to report to work. With low supplies of antivirals available through physicians, people are turning to drugs bought in markets and online for self prophylactic medication, with a high percentage of these drugs being fake.

Community leaders are strongly critical of the actions of the administration and are accusing the government of hoarding medications and antivirals for themselves.

For facilitators and evaluators

The following questions can be used to guide the discussions. Questions are divided by scenario, as different strategies may be in place for different Pandemic Alert levels. The expected result is given to assist evaluators in assessing the response.

Scenario A

To evaluate social mobilization strategies proposed for health education on personal and community hygiene during pandemic alert and pandemic periods.

And

To evaluate strategies for risk communication to the public.

- What kind of messages will the government be sending to the population at large about how to prevent catching or spreading the virus?
There should be a clear strategy of what to tell the public at different pandemic alert and pandemic phases regarding the role of the individual in preventing the spread of the virus.
- What medium will be used?
A variety of methods may be necessary in order to achieve effective communication with the public. Possible means of communication include web sites, call centres, radio and television messages.
- Who will be in charge of creating and disseminating these messages?
All parties should know who the decision makers are on the creation, design and dissemination of the messages.
- Who would deliver messages to the press at the national level? What about in different regions?
National and regional level spokespersons should be appointed to be responsible for all media presentations to the community.
- What languages will be used?
Even if the having only one official language, an assessment of what languages are spoken in the population should be made. Any significant population speaking a different language or even a small population that forms a high risk group should be considered in the communications strategy
- How is the public informed of the current influenza risk?
During the pandemic alert period, there should be a early and open communication with the public as to the current threat level in order to prevent rumours and panic.
- Are there different risk communication strategies for different groups?
Groups at greater risk of infection than the general population (those dealing with animals, etc.) should be recognized and targeted with language and context specific communications regarding the risk of infection and how best to protect themselves.

To review strategies proposed for use of non-pharmaceutical interventions for limiting the spread of infection in the community during influenza pandemic alert and pandemic periods.

- What kinds of non-pharmaceutical interventions will be used to prevent spread of infection in health care settings during the pandemic alert phase?
Patients who are suspected of being infected with a potential pandemic strain influenza should be cared for in an isolated environment. The healthcare workers caring for the patient(s) should wear appropriate personal protective equipment.

- What specific measures will be suggested to the public to decrease chances of catching or spreading the virus during the pandemic alert phase?
Educating the public of the current risk level is key to prevention and avoiding panic. Messages about proper food preparation, hand hygiene and cough etiquette are all possible elements of a non-pharmaceutical strategy.
- How will people who may be infected be encouraged to go to hospital?
Risk communication to both the general public and at risk groups should emphasize the need to get medical care immediately if suspecting infection. Coordination with community groups and religious organizations early in the pandemic alert phase is key in sending a consistent message that the virus is not caused by any actions of the individual and that reporting to hospital is the right thing to do.

To review strategies proposed for use of pharmaceutical interventions for limiting the spread of infection in the community during influenza pandemic alert periods.

- Is the use of antivirals planned for during the pandemic alert period?
If the national plan calls for antiviral usage during the pandemic alert phase, there should be an ethical and if possible evidence based policy for the use of the antivirals. The policy on the use of antivirals should be communicated clearly to the public.
- Will pharmaceutical measures be taken to protect people who come in contact with sick birds?
Guidelines should be in place for dealing with individuals who have contact with sick animals, use of adequate protective equipment and antiviral prophylaxis if part of the national plan.
- How will the government react to unfavourable public opinion on the use of antivirals?
Early, transparent and consistent communication of the policy for the use and distribution of antivirals will send a message to the public that the government has considered the possibilities and chosen the best possible course of action given available resources.

Scenario B

To evaluate social mobilization strategies proposed for health education on personal and community hygiene during pandemic alert and pandemic periods.

And

To evaluate strategies for risk communication to the public.

- What will the government do to address the concerns of the population?
A risk communications strategy should be in place at all phases of alert. A process should be in place outlining who is responsible for writing, approving and issuing these communications. Communications should be reissued periodically and revised as new information becomes available.
- How will the government address the accusations of hoarding medication?
Communication of the contents of the pandemic plan and the procedures to be followed need to be communicated to the public. A legal and ethical justification for prioritization of medication and treatment must be in place and well communicated to the population.
- What will the government do to address the fake drugs on the market?
In addition to law enforcement procedures, a communications programme should be in place to inform the population about the prevalence of fake drugs and their dangers.
- Who would deliver messages to the press at the national level? What about in different regions?
National and regional level spokespersons should be appointed to be responsible for all media presentations to the community.

To review strategies proposed for use of non-pharmaceutical interventions for limiting the spread of infection in the community during influenza pandemic alert and pandemic periods.

- As the healthcare system becomes stressed, it is likely that many infected persons will be cared for at home. What guidelines will the government offer for those caring for the ill at home?
Guidelines for how to care for patients in a home setting should be available and include infection control practices.
- What measures will be suggested to the community to prevent spread?
A variety of measures can be considered including limiting mass gatherings, closing schools, etc.. Regardless of the measures included in the plan, a plan for how to implement the measures should be indicated. For instance, if home quarantine is suggested, measures must be in place to provide for food and medical care. The specific conditions and societal norms of the exercising country need to be considered in the proposing of non-pharmaceutical measures, taking into consideration the psychological, economic and social impact of the measures.

To review strategies proposed for use of pharmaceutical interventions for limiting the spread of infection in the community during influenza pandemic alert periods.

- Do adequate supplies of antibiotics exist to treat secondary infections in influenza patients?
Many patients infected with pandemic influenza will develop secondary infections that are treatable with antibiotics. What supplies exist for this purpose?

- Do antivirals play a role in the national plan at the pandemic stage?
If the plan calls for the use of antivirals during the pandemic stage, as in the pandemic alert phases, a clear and ethically grounded policy must exist for their use.
- Who will be given antivirals, and when?
Nearly every nation will need to make a decision regarding who will receive antivirals, under what conditions and when. The plan needs to have a legal and ethical justification for the procedures indicated, and these procedures need to be clearly communicated to the public.