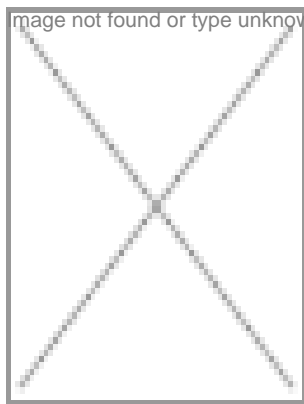


Lessons for India from swine flu

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Exactly a year ago, the world was swept by the swine flu scare with the first cases reported from Mexico that spread to all the continents within week. A year later, the swine flu scare has died down. The Influenza A H1N1 virus did not wreak the havoc it was predicted to by some of the experts.

Experts have learnt another great lesson from this episode that it doesn't pay to press the panic button at the slightest pretext. The global scare created in mid-2005 about bird flu sweeping the world within months of an outbreak and hitting the most vulnerable sections of the society too has shown that health experts are scare mongers?

The jury is out on this but we may not have the verdict too soon. Is it not better to be safe than

What about the scenario in India? Swine flu is not a word that scares anyone now in the country. The panic queues that formed outside the swine flu testing centers in June-July 2009 has been replaced with a calm. The first set of vaccination of health workers who will be in the frontline of handling future swine flu cases has started in many states in early April.

Imported vaccines, supplied by Sanofi Pasteur, has been provided in adequate quantities to key affected states. Two indigenous swine flu vaccines, developed by Zydus Cadila and Serum Institute of India are currently in phase II and III trials. Advance results so far indicate good efficacy and the regulator, Drug Controller General of India (DCGI) may give the final go ahead by April-end. Delhi-based Panacea Biotec is investing in a new swine flu manufacturing facility in Punjab.

This is the good news from the swine flu scare for the country. For the first time, the country has geared up well to face

similar epidemics in the near future. The capabilities developed to produce swine flu vaccines will come in handy to deal with influenza epidemics in the future. Influenza was one area that was not taken seriously in the country so far with less than 0.5 percent vaccination against any type of this viral epidemic.

World Health Organization (WHO) goaded Indian policy makers into action four years ago when it anticipated an outbreak of bird flu (Influenza A H1N5) and selected a few Indian vaccine makers to provide them with the expertise. This advance planning helped the country tide over the swine flu crisis that came in instead. Hopefully, India's public health policy makers have learnt the right lessons from the swine flu episode and will not delay sanction of funds to create buffer stocks of essential vaccines. This was one area India's policy makers failed miserably.

A proud nation that aspires global leadership should not be dependent on global NGOs like Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and even GAVI (Global Alliance for Vaccination and Immunization), a consortium of multinational vaccine makers, to provide essential medical treatment to its citizens.

India will require just over a billion dollars or Rs 4,500 crore annually to vaccinate all its vulnerable citizens and stockpile some essential vaccines to deal with epidemics like swine flu. It is important to keep adequate stocks and spare production capacity within the country. Luckily, in the swine flu episode India did not have to depend on limited spare vaccines which would have been doled out if the epidemic had become a major health scare in 2009.

The nation is in a happy position in accessing financial resources thanks to the high economic growth rates. The Manmohan Singh government should channel additional resources similar to what is being pumped in the education sector (\$30 billion) to this equally fundamental task of safeguarding the health of the nation. Resources are the issue here. A national change in mindset is required to anticipate and plan for looming episodes of epidemic diseases.

Group Editor

<sureshn@cybermedia.co.in>