

'Biosafety and biosecurity are important for strengthening global

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It is extremely difficult for life sciences companies and regulators to anticipate the arrival of the next pandemic and its consequences. According to the World Health Organization, by 2009, at least 10,582 global deaths were reported due to influenza pandemic and Asia was one of the prominently affected regions. The onset of H1N1 influenza in 2009 was a big challenge for the industry and it cut out a task for biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies to find ways to prevent, handle and treat such diseases in the future.

In an e-mail interaction with *BioSpectrum*, Ms Maureen Ellis, co-chair, International Federation of Biosafety Associations (IFBA), speaks about the current situation in Asia and steps that need to be taken to handle a pandemic more efficiently. The IFBA is a collaboration of national and regional biosafety organizations to support and promote biosafety measures.

Q What are the major areas of concern in biosafety in Asia and what are the actions that are needed?

Ms Ellis: Infectious diseases brush aside geographic and political boundaries, and constitute a global threat that puts every

nation and every person at risk. In this age of expanding travel and international trade, infectious microbes are transported across borders every day, carried by infected people, animals, insects and goods.

This is a growing concern for the authorities as these outbreaks are often difficult to control, and their spread across borders can be so rapid that the countries that are affected fail to respond adequately.

The IFBA recognizes that biosafety and biosecurity are important elements within the greater framework of strengthening global health and security. Promoting high standards of safe and secure operation of biological facilities of all kinds, underpins the effort to enhance the capacity to respond to the most challenging biological risks in areas with high endemic diseases, such as South East Asia.

We recognize the need for innovative approaches to develop affordable biosafety and biosecurity capacities, appropriate for those areas of the world that have limited resources. Further, we recognize that, in promoting the implementation of appropriate biosafety and biosecurity practices, we need to keep pace with the rapidly developing field of life sciences. We also recognize the need to implement the strategies and practices in a manner that does not impede progress in the life sciences.

Q How is the IFBA bringing awareness, knowledge and safety measures to a diverse region such as Asia?

Ms Ellis: The IFBA is a global community of scientists, biosafety professionals, laboratory personnel, architects, engineers, academicians and policy makers who have common interest in advancing biosafety and biosecurity. Our members represent regional and national biosafety associations from countries around the world, including those in South East Asia. By working collectively with its member organizations and leveraging resources, the IFBA is able to reach the local level in the countries and deliver sustainable biosafety capacity building programs where they are needed the most.

Q What are the areas of biosafety where Asia lags behind?

Ms Ellis: IFBA has identified priority goals and projects to help address short-term gaps and needs. There is a need to raise awareness from political and public perspectives, and encourage collaborations among human and animal health communities.

It is important to develop sustainable biosafety associations and map the gaps. There is also a need to advise national authorities and services on improving efficient waste management through disseminating knowledge about appropriate systems, tools and technologies for public and veterinary health environments. It is equally important to promote human and laboratory capacity building with proper identification of gaps and needs using the best available concepts, principles and practices.

The IFBA has also identified long-term goals, such as promoting biosafety education, particularly among the younger generation, involving curriculum development within a common framework and a common methodology for evaluation.

It is crucial to support the development of an appropriate and practical legislative framework and strategy to obtain funding for applied biosafety research programs.

Q What threats does a country face and how can they be handled?

Ms Ellis: IFBA draws attention to the serious dangers that can arise from the failure to implement biosafety and biosecurity effectively. We highlight the significant benefits offered by the implementation of sound biosafety and biosecurity practices.

They include minimizing socio-economic impact of human and animal disease outbreaks and better protection of laboratory staff, the wider community and the environment. We need to contribute to better biosecurity through control of access to dangerous pathogens and tracking their use and improving reporting of incidents.

— **Amrita Tejasvi** in Singapore