

Dr Anarfi Asamoah-Baah
Assistant Director-General, Communicable Diseases, WHO

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Trends

The infectious disease threat has resurged dramatically during the past three decades.

- Old diseases, once thought conquered, have re-emerged.
- New diseases are emerging at an unprecedented rate.
- Treatments are losing their effectiveness as drug resistance spreads.

These trends are certain to continue.

The natural propensity of microbial agents to mutate and adapt has been amplified by:

- Rapid population growth
- Rural-urban migration
- Collapsing health systems
- Environmental mismanagement
- Altered agricultural and animal husbandry practices
- Misuse of medicines
- International travel and trade

Impact

Infectious diseases kill, disable, and surprise.

- The three biggest killers are AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Last year, these diseases caused 5.6 million deaths.
- The so-called "neglected" diseases permanently disable and otherwise impair the lives of millions of people, but cause comparative few deaths. They form a group because they affect almost exclusively the poorest of the poor – the people left behind by socioeconomic development. They are neglected at three levels: national, international, and research.
- Surprises come from unpredictable outbreaks of new and epidemic-prone diseases, which are costly and disruptive as well as deadly. (Examples of economic costs of recent outbreaks.) The 21st century has already witnessed three high-profile events caused by epidemic-prone infectious agents: the deliberate distribution of anthrax spores in an act of bioterrorism, SARS, and the unprecedented outbreaks of avian influenza in Asia, which enhanced the risk of another influenza pandemic.

Actions

Much can be done to combat each group of diseases, and much progress has been made.

- Examples for major killers: Global Fund, Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, Roll Back Malaria and Stop TB partnerships.
- Examples for neglected diseases: Public-private partnerships based on industry donations for the mass delivery of existing drugs (time-limited eradication or elimination initiatives). The new breed of strategic R&D partnerships to develop badly needed new control tools.

- Examples for emerging and epidemic-prone diseases: international mechanisms, development of local capacity, lessons from SARS and avian influenza.