



# WHO to set up emergencies programme

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The World Health Organization will establish a health emergencies programme in response to widespread criticism over its handling of the Ebola epidemic in west Africa.<sup>1</sup> WHO described the programme as one of the most “profound transformations” in its history. The organisation would take an operational role in emergencies, as well as its usual technical role.

WHO said in a statement, “The new programme was designed to deliver rapid, predictable, and comprehensive support to countries and communities as they prepared for, faced, or recovered from emergencies caused by any type of hazard to human health, whether disease outbreaks, natural or man made disasters, or conflicts.”

Delegates at the World Health Assembly in Geneva—the decision making body of WHO—agreed a budget of \$494m (£335.87m; €441.49m) for the programme for 2016-17, an increase of \$160m to the existing budget for WHO’s work in emergencies.

WHO would provide leadership in emergencies through the international health regulations, which have been the subject of an independent review. The chair of the review committee, Didier Houssin, presented his findings to the assembly and said that failings in the response to Ebola were not a result of failings in the regulations but a result of failure to implement them.

He told delegates that the regulations needed to be implemented in a “much more rigorous manner.”

He was critical of a lack of cooperation between countries during the Ebola epidemic, saying, “Some countries have even taken additional measures which have had a negative impact on the countries affected most seriously by the Ebola virus outbreak.

“The application of article 44 [of the international health regulations] on cooperation between poor and wealthy countries and between neighbouring countries should not be just a useful plan but an obsession,” he said.

The review urged countries to implement the regulations, to make sure that they had robust surveillance, detection, and response capabilities.

WHO was criticised for its delay in declaring a public health emergency of international concern—which can only be declared in certain circumstances—at the height of the Ebola outbreak.

The review called for the introduction of an international public health alert to serve as an early warning when the situation does not justify declaring a full emergency.

“If that alert is issued then certain decisions should be undertaken by both the WHO secretariat and member states. The definition of that decision and how that decision should be triggered has not yet been looked at in enough detail by the review committee,” said Hussein.

Member states overwhelmingly supported the report of the committee. Sally Davies, chief medical officer for England and the UK delegate to the assembly, said that lower and middle income countries would need financial support to help them implement the regulations.

She added, “It’s time to move forward to action while continuing discussions to finalise the detail otherwise we risk losing momentum . . . Now is not the time to be faint hearted.”

1 Gulland A. WHO’s crisis handling to be overhauled after slow response to Ebola. *BMJ* 2015;350:h460. [www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h460?ijkey=b48ea0124ab86bc1aa2264403647a9edfac07d91&keytype2=tf\\_ipsecsha](http://www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h460?ijkey=b48ea0124ab86bc1aa2264403647a9edfac07d91&keytype2=tf_ipsecsha).

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