Covid-19: WHO declares end of global health emergency

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The World Health Organization has declared that covid-19 is no longer a "global health emergency" while emphasising that it remains a global health threat.1

On 30 January 2020 WHO declared a public health emergency of international concern over the global outbreak of covid-192 and since then 7 million deaths have been reported to the organisation. But WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that the true death toll is at least 20 million and warned countries to remain vigilant.

Speaking at a media briefing on 5 May, he said, “This virus is here to stay. It is still killing, and it’s still changing. The risk remains of new variants emerging that cause new surges in cases and deaths.

“The worst thing any country could do now is to use this news as a reason to let down its guard, to dismantle the systems it has built, or to send the message to its people that covid-19 is nothing to worry about.”

WHO’s emergency committee made the decision after analysing the decreasing trend in covid-19 deaths, the decline in related hospital admissions and intensive care admissions, and the high levels of population immunity to SARS-CoV-2. They determined that covid-19 should now be considered an established and ongoing health matter which no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern.

The UN organisation said countries should transition from emergency mode to long term management of covid-19 alongside other infectious diseases. It is setting up a review committee to develop long term recommendations for countries on how to manage the virus on an ongoing basis. It has also published the fourth edition of its global strategic preparedness and response plan for covid-19 which covers collaborative surveillance, community protection, safe and scalable care, access to countermeasures, and emergency coordination.3

Vaccines were one of the major turning points in the pandemic with 13.3 billion doses given worldwide. Currently 89% of health workers and 82% of adults over 60 years have received the primary course of covid-19 vaccine, WHO said. Coverage in those priority groups varied widely around the world, however.

According to GAVI, which co-leads the Covax initiative for equitable access to covid-19 vaccines, global coverage with a primary series (two doses) of vaccine stands at 64% on average, and at 55% on average in the 92 lowest income countries.

Seth Berkley, GAVI’s chief executive, said that the world is ready to move to the next phase. “But while today marks a historic milestone, we must also be clear about the need to continue to protect our most vulnerable people, as we do for other deadly but preventable diseases. Around three out of ten older adults in lower income countries have not yet had two doses, and we know they are among those most likely to become severely ill or die from covid-19.”

Giving thanks to the skill and dedication of health and care workers and the innovation of vaccine researchers and developers, Tedros said this was a moment for celebration. But he also said it was a time for reflection and that covid-19 has left deep scars on our world. “As a global community, the suffering we have endured, the painful lessons we have learnt, the investments we have made, and the capacities we have built must not go to waste,” he said.

“One of the greatest tragedies of covid-19 is that it didn’t have to be this way. We have the tools and the technologies to prepare for pandemics better, to detect them earlier, to respond to them faster, and to mitigate their impact. But globally, a lack of coordination, a lack of equity, and a lack of solidarity meant that those tools were not used as effectively as they could have been. Lives were lost that should not have been.”

2 Mahase E. China coronavirus: WHO declares international emergency as death toll exceeds 200. BMJ 2020;368. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m408 pmid: 32005727

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