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Fiji pandemic plan testing exercise

A table-top testing exercise was held at Pacific Harbour, Fiji, on 4–5 December 2007 to assist in enhancing Fiji's preparedness for an influenza pandemic. The exercise focused on testing Fiji's National Influenza Pandemic Plan (and subplans) and specifically aimed to:

- improve linkages between the different sectors involved in avian/pandemic influenza preparedness;
- identify and document gaps and inadequacies in the existing national plan (and subplans);
- contribute to the development of solutions to address the gaps and inadequacies identified.

Approximately 70 participants from a wide range of sectors, including government and non-government organisations, and representatives from the media and private industry, attended the workshop. Key Fiji Government agencies included the Ministries of Agriculture and Health, Customs, Quarantine, Marine Safety Authority, Police, Education and Transport.

SPC and Fiji's Ministries of Health and Agriculture collaborated on the preparations for the exercise.

Setting the scene

The exercise was opened by Mr Malakai Tadulala (Permanent Secretary of Fiji's Ministry of Agriculture), who noted that while preventing the introduction of serious diseases through robust quarantine measures at ports of entry into Fiji is clearly important, the ability of people and animal products to be rapidly transported across the globe increases the potential for the introduction and spread of disease. It is therefore appropriate that Fiji (and other Pacific Island nations) develops effective surveillance, early warning and rapid containment systems to enable diseases such as bird flu and pandemic influenza to be quickly identified and effectively managed should they be introduced.

An update on the H5N1 situation was provided to the participants

Since the initial report of bird flu due to the H5N1 virus in poultry in Southeast Asia in 2003, bird flu (H5N1) has now been reported in either poultry or wild birds in 60 countries across Asia, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, Europe and Africa. While the H5N1 virus remains a disease primarily of birds, infection has also occurred in humans who have had close contact with sick or dead birds. As at 28 December 2007, 346 cases of human infection with H5N1 had been reported to WHO, including 213 fatalities.

Dr Jacob Kool (WHO, Suva) outlined WHO's recommendations on emergency preparedness for an influenza pandemic and effective disease control measures during a pandemic. Dr Narendra Singh (SPC, Suva) provided a historical perspective on the 1918 influenza pandemic, which was responsible for the deaths of an estimated 8000 Fijians.

Scenario-based exercises

As the emergence of an influenza pandemic is considered likely to occur through mutation of an avian influenza virus, the Fiji testing exercise included scenarios covering the occurrence of bird-flu-like disease in wild birds as well as in domesticated poultry in both backyard and commercial settings. Issues such as timely response, public awareness, disease reporting, containment, specimen collection and the use of rapid diagnostic kits were highlighted.

Other scenarios covered the occurrence of bird-flu-like disease in humans, and highlighted the importance of good history taking, disease reporting and the need for effective 'trigger' points to activate emergency response arrangements.

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Preparedness measures relating to border management systems, quarantine facilities and disease diagnosis, and the importance of establishing disease containment through good infection control measures, public awareness and education in the event of an influenza pandemic were also examined.

Conclusion

The Fiji table-top exercise brought together a large number of key personnel from government and non-government sectors alike, and for many participants provided a first opportunity for face-to-face discussions on influenza pandemic preparedness. In evaluating the workshop, participants reported that the scenario-based exercises were very useful in identifying both policy and operational aspects in areas such as border control and national coordination that require further consideration and development by Fiji's National Influenza Taskforce to enhance preparedness.

While Fiji's National Influenza Taskforce has already made much headway in developing and establishing the country's preparedness, the engagement of Fiji's National Disaster Management Organisation was identified as a vital requirement to strengthen the national coordination of Fiji's influenza pandemic preparedness and emergency response plans. For its part, SPC will continue to work cooperatively with Fiji's National Influenza Taskforce to assist in improving Fiji's preparedness, through both emergency response planning and training initiatives under PRIPPP.

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