

SEASON'S WORST: ON THE INFLUENZA OUTBREAK

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Seasonal influenza poses a significant public health challenge for India every year. The spurt in infections during the first two weeks of 2019 cries out for an effective plan to contain it. Rajasthan, which had a big case load last year, is the worst-affected State in the current season, with 768 cases and 31 deaths as of January 13. There have been peaks in the country over the past six years, with the number of cases recorded by the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme soaring to 42,592 and the death toll touching 2,990 in 2015. With better understanding of the nature of active viruses and the availability of a quadrivalent vaccine, State governments have no excuse for failing to sharply reduce the spread. Last year, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare deputed teams to assist Rajasthan in containing the outbreak. It is pertinent to ask what preventive measures were put in place based on the experience. Large-scale vaccination covering high-risk groups such as health workers, people with lung, kidney, liver and heart disease, diabetics and the elderly could reduce the impact of the viruses in States such as Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Telangana and the National Capital Region, all of which had a large number of cases three years ago. A universal preventive programme should be considered at least for the future.

State put on alert for H1N1 influenza

Last year, the Union Health Ministry put out an advisory on the right vaccine to protect against a known set of viruses, such as Influenza A H1N1, H3N2 and Influenza B. Yet, most public health programmes are not prepared for a mass adoption of the vaccine. Non-availability of sufficient doses of quadrivalent vaccine as well as profiteering on the demand have not been addressed. If a vaccine has proven efficacy in reducing the burden of seasonal influenza, it must be made part of the public health system. An umbrella scheme such as Ayushman Bharat can easily provide it to everyone using public and private institutions. Campaigns to educate the public through mass media ahead of the season, especially on respiratory etiquette and risk reduction, can help cut transmission. At the same time, upgrading existing vaccines requires a consistent effort to track viral mutations that take place periodically, and communicate the information to researchers through open access databases. There are 41 Virus Research Diagnostic Laboratories in India and they can study the nature of infections to provide genetic insights to peer scientists. This can help develop vaccines and remedies. When it comes to treatment, the availability of anti-viral drugs such as Oseltamivir in the public health system should be ensured. Seasonal influenza will, according to the WHO, continue to resurface. India must prepare for it with a comprehensive programme that covers all the States.

The Meghalaya government must urgently ensure that all illegal mines are shut down

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