

The International Health Regulations (2005)

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A critical contribution to international health security

The entry into force of the International Health Regulations (2005) (IHR (2005)) on 15 June 2007 is a public health landmark for the World Health Organization (WHO) and its Member States. The global community has a new legal framework to better manage its collective defences to detect disease events and to respond to public health risks and emergencies that can have devastating impacts on human health and economies. The successful implementation of the IHR (2005) by the countries that have agreed to be bound by them (States Parties) and WHO, will contribute significantly to enhancing national and global public health security.

New mandate and obligations in the IHR (2005)

The IHR (2005) have a broad scope as they require States Parties to notify a potentially wide range of events to WHO on the basis of defined criteria indicating that the event may constitute a *public health emergency of international concern*. WHO is obliged to request verification of events that it detects through its surveillance activities with the countries concerned, who must respond to such requests in a timely manner. States Parties are also obliged to inform WHO of significant evidence of public health risks outside their territory that may cause international disease spread. Notifications and information are communicated by a National IHR Focal Point to a WHO IHR Contact Point which, together, establish a unique and effective communications network between countries and with WHO.

States Parties are further required to ensure that their national health surveillance and response capacities meet certain functional criteria and have a set timeframe in which to meet these standards. IHR (2005) provisions with regard to routine public health measures for international traffic at points of entry (airports, ports and certain ground crossings) have been updated and certain minimum capacity requirements are set out for international points of entry that have been designated by countries.

The IHR (2005) also set out procedures for certain rare but very serious events which are determined to constitute a public health emergency of international concern. Only the Director-General of WHO has the authority to make such a determination, but only after consultation with an Emergency Committee of external experts before issuing temporary recommendations for the application of appropriate health measures to prevent the international spread of disease and to avoid interference with international traffic.

Implementation of IHR (2005)

WHO and its Member States continue to move ahead with a number of aspects of IHR (2005) implementation, including the designation of National IHR Focal Points, WHO IHR Contact Points and the establishment of the IHR Expert Roster. Addressing the current pandemic threat and other public health emergencies through the IHR (2005), is one of the important focuses for activity as countries and WHO tackle the considerable challenge of implementing this multi-faceted global agreement with the aim of building a more secure future.