Press Release
WHO Heeds ASEAN Caution on Negative Impact of Alarmist Posture on H1N1 Warning
ASEAN Secretariat, 27 May 2009

Concerns raised by ASEAN over the World Health Organization's criteria for pandemic influenza phases may now lead to the health body changing its policy.

The WHO's decision to consider whether to revise WHO's definitions of pandemic alert phases comes in the wake of a meeting of top ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, Republic of Korea) health officials in Bangkok in early May 2009, said the WHO's Assistant Director-General for Health Security and the Environment, Dr Keiji Fukuda, during a teleconference on 26 May 2009.

The ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers, in the Joint Ministerial Statement of their Special Meeting on Influenza A(H1N1) on 8 May 2009 in Bangkok, had called for the Director-General of WHO, in consultation with experts and Member States, to consider the possibility of optimising the criteria for pandemic alert level determination. The new criteria will not only apply transmissibility/epidemiologic determinants such as the number of cases but also include clinical determinants (morbidity and mortality), and gene sequence of the virus, among other determinants.

The decision was based on the concerns expressed at the ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Special Meeting and also at the World Health Assembly (WHA) in Geneva last week on causing undue alarm to the public due to the outbreak of Influenza A(H1N1). The WHA, which is the world's highest health policy setting body, at its 62nd Session in Geneva on 18-22 May 2009, made the recommendation that "the pandemic phases should reflect not only the geographic extent of the disease, but also its severity".

According to Dr Fukuda, the WHO will call on outside scientists and public health experts to consider whether to revise WHO's definitions of pandemic alert phases.

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For the complete Joint Ministerial Statement of the ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Special Meeting on Influenza A(H1N1), please go to http://www.asean.org/22543.htm