Evolution of Public Health in Asia Pacific

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In the past decade, we were faced with public health challenges due to the demographic and epidemiological transitions of health and disease in the Asia-Pacific region. The Asia-Pacific region is an important focus for global health because of the size of the population and the high population density. There has been a constant fight against our traditional public health enemies including infectious diseases and malnutrition, and in more recent decades the threat from non-communicable diseases. Of particular public health concern are obesity, cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and road traffic injuries.

In 2003, the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic began in Guangdong, People’s Republic of China and rapidly spread internationally, resulting in a major public health effort coordinated by the World Health Organization to limit its spread. However, by the end of 2003, it had spread to 30 countries. More than 50% of the SARS cases occurred in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Singapore, and Vietnam.¹ More recently, we have seen the evolution of the H5N1 avian influenza virus in 2011. The Nipah virus is another newly emerging disease that was first identified in Malaysia and has since been found in several other countries. We have also seen the emergence of communicable diseases due to the consequences of the increasing numbers of natural disasters, including earthquakes, floods, famines, and armed conflict. These have caused many injuries and deaths and have contributed to the spread of infectious diseases.

Emerging infectious diseases have caused considerable economic and social disruption due to the need for screening, treatment and quarantine. After their seriousness was recognized they resulted in a coordinated international response and changed public perceptions of the risks of communicable diseases. No longer were infections regarded as a threat from a past era, but are now thought of as presenting emerging threats. Many lessons have been learnt from the international collaboration in combating these emerging diseases and it is to be hoped that future threats to global health will result in a more rapid and effective response.

The noncommunicable disease epidemics of our region are continuing their advance in countries at all stages of development. The major problems to be faced are cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, the tobacco epidemic, and the rising rates of deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents. The Asia-Pacific region includes countries with the highest rate of tobacco usage (Indonesia) and the lowest global rate (Australia).

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