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Global Public Health Leaders warn about political leadership that harms

Around the world, the rapid spread of the Delta variant is posing a grave threat to pandemic control, highlighting the critical need for effective leadership informed by the best available evidence, global public health leaders have warned.

Members of the Public Health Leadership Coalition, launched earlier this year by the World Federation of Public Health Associations, met on June 28 to share updates on the COVID-19 pandemic from their respective countries.

The meeting heard that political imperatives are driving harmful policies in some countries, such as reopening and hosting big gatherings, and that the pandemic is being prolonged by global inequities in access to COVID vaccines as well as vaccine hesitancy in many countries.

“This meeting has highlighted the urgent need to make governments accountable for their choice. This is not the time for complacency, nor for a relaxed attitude,” said Prof Ricciardi, WFPHA president and coalition Chairman.

Professor K. Srinath Reddy, President of the Public Health Foundation of India, told the meeting that in India, the Delta Plus variant has recently emerged and is still being studied. The numbers of people infected by this variant are still small. “Delta variant is still the dominant virus. However, the addition of the K.417.N mutation in the Delta Plus raises concerns about reduced vaccine efficacy. This aspect is being examined,” he said.

“In Canada, the response to the pandemic has been seriously impaired by lack of political and policy alignment, and poor coordination within and across federal, provincial, and municipal levels, during all phases. This was fuelled by deficient information systems, outdated protocols and the inexperience of those in charge, and worsened by the appointment or replacement of experts with bureaucrats at key agencies,” highlighted Professor Alejandro Jadad, founder of the Centre for Global eHealth Innovation.

“In South American countries, a lack of political leadership is also contributing to the spread of COVID, especially in countries such as Colombia, Brazil and Chile,” said Professor Maria del Rocio Saenz, former Minister of Health of Costa Rica. In her own country, intensive care units were filled to capacity and the health system remains under great stress, she said. “Disadvantaged groups are more vulnerable to the variant,” she said. “The pandemic has highlighted the importance of addressing the underlying inequities in the determinants of health, such as poverty, housing, and access to healthy living conditions.”

In Africa, the third wave that started early in May is hitting hard with hospital beds capacity overwhelmed in many countries such as DRC, according to Dr Jean-Marie Okwo-Bele, former director of the Immunization and Vaccines Department at WHO. “It is vital that public health leadership helped promote evidence-informed messaging that resonates with local communities” he said.

Dr Okwo-Bele highlighted the need for political leaders, religious and other influential community leaders to urgently step up efforts to amplify critical health messages about Covid-19. “The lack of action on vaccine inequities and wider inequities is stopping recovery for everyone,” he added. “All countries and all people will benefit when global, national and local inequities are addressed.”

Delegates also raised concerns about the potential for the European Football Championships to spread COVID infections across Europe, with tens of thousands of people from all over Europe visiting London in few days. “We fear this will prove to be a seeding event for the rest of Europe,” said Professor Bettina Borisch, WFPHA CEO. “We need to advocate with organisations such UEFA and FIFA that are putting pressure on governments”.

The leadership coalition, led by Prof Walter Ricciardi, WFPHA president, is working with ministers of health from different countries and is calling on them to join forces to reduce the huge disparities in equities, regarding the supply of vaccines and beyond. Leaders stands ready to support the development and implementation of the WHO proposed Global Pandemic Treaty.

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