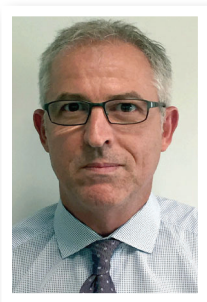


PREPARING FOR PANDEMICS



While the Zika virus has yet to be classified as a pandemic, it is a reminder that these outbreaks can be costly for ill-prepared companies, says **Dr Fanie Jute** of **International SOS Dubai**.



A year ago, few people other than medical professionals had heard of Zika. Today, the virus is one of the most-searched terms on Google and has been the subject of tens of thousands of news articles.

For businesses, disease outbreaks like Zika can potentially impact people and productivity. There is a human toll in sickness or worse. Unwell employees are unable to do their jobs, nervous staff may be less willing to travel to win that new deal or open that new plant, and expatriate families may want to pack up and head home.

They can also be costly. Managing outbreaks can require emergency medical treatment, large-scale relocations and more.

Ultimately, many of these unexpected costs of medical treatment are passed to a company's insurer, but many of the other business costs impact the bottom line.

While an individual outbreak is unpredictable, the fact that there will be outbreaks is not. Companies can and should prepare.

Preparing for the impacts of a disease outbreak is easier and cheaper

than knee-jerk reactions as an outbreak grows and spreads. Prevention leads to better outcomes for staff, for businesses, and for the insurance companies picking up the unanticipated bills.

The risk of disease outbreaks is particularly a concern for companies in international business hubs such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha. Many companies here are expanding into new markets across the Middle East, in Africa and South Asia. They explore emerging markets and seek new customers to grow. The ever-expanding route networks of Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways are an important catalyst for the development of offices here.

PwC predicts there will be a further 50% increase in international assignments by 2020. International mobility is an important driver of competitiveness and economic growth.

International SOS research has shown that in the UAE, around half of all executives report that their geographical responsibilities have widened in the past two years. A third travel for business more than ever before. These new markets can include

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countries with unfamiliar medical risks and medical infrastructure.

Even in established locations, business travellers and international assignees can find that limited local knowledge, cultural differences and language barriers mean they need help in finding the medical support they need for routine health issues. This can range from managing chronic conditions like diabetes to dealing with pregnancy and delivery.

The Zika virus

The Zika virus is spread by mosquitos and was first discovered in 1947. The first human case was reported in 1952, and there have been a few sporadic cases reported from Africa and Asia since.

In 2007 and 2013, there were outbreaks in the Pacific. In May last year, Zika appeared in Brazil. It has since been spreading rapidly through the Americas.

There is growing evidence linking Zika to birth defects and neurological complications. The World Health Organisation has labelled it a “public health emergency of international concern”. At the time of writing, there is no vaccine and no cure, and the outbreak is likely to spread further, possibly infecting millions.

Is Zika virus a pandemic? Pandemics are epidemics that affect the whole world. They can occur when a “new” virus emerges that has the following properties:

- Humans have little or no immunity to it;
- The virus can cause significant illness or death;
- The virus can spread easily from person to person; and
- There is no vaccine or specific treatment.

So far, Zika does not appear to spread easily from human to human. We now know that Zika can spread through sexual transmission and through blood transfusion, but whether other body fluids such as saliva and urine are infectious is currently the subject of further research.

Planning for pandemics

We do not know how Zika will develop or what the next disease outbreak will be. But we do know that organisations that are prepared will handle disease

outbreaks better than those that are not. They will meet their duty of care to their employees more effectively and at lower cost.

Each company has its own circumstances and characteristics, but our advice at International SOS is that pandemic preparedness planners should consider the following:

- **Pandemics can occur anywhere, anytime**

A new virus can spread internationally in a short time. It is important that an organisation’s pandemic plan cover all geographies, not just those where outbreaks have occurred.

- **Pandemics can be fast-moving**

Outbreaks can evolve rapidly. Companies should develop a pandemic plan that is responsive and adaptive, so they can quickly and consistently react and communicate with staff.

- **Severity should inform the response**

Assessing the severity of an outbreak can be a challenge. Media reports and community sentiment can have a significant impact on perception of risk, which can drive behaviour as much as or more than reality on the ground. Companies should develop processes and guidelines to assess severity in their locations and clearly communicate that information to their employees.

- **There will be a need to respond to the unknown**

An organisation’s pandemic plan should enable it to tailor information based on employees’ needs as individuals or small groups, rather than as an entire population. There can be confusion and a lack of definitive information about the nature of a new illness. The challenge is to communicate the unknowns in a balanced, appropriate and tailored manner, focusing broadly on practical, actionable steps that everyone should take. More severe measures to protect specific, affected populations should be enacted where and when necessary.

- **Different places have variable capabilities to manage a pandemic**

Some countries and regions are better prepared to respond to an infectious disease outbreak than others. Organisations should examine the responses to recent outbreaks in the countries where they operate and develop plans that incorporate these variations in healthcare capacity.


Need for an integrated and coordinated approach

In the end, no one company can manage all the impacts of a pandemic on its own. What we have learned from disease outbreaks in the past is that preparing and responding to public health emergencies requires an integrated and coordinated approach, involving both international and national government organisations, as well as companies.

In the UAE, the disease outbreak response of private medical institutions is regulated by the health authorities and guided by detailed emergency preparedness plans. These plans are regularly reviewed, with disease outbreak drills taking place at various medical institutions.

Countries in the GCC have robust surveillance mechanisms in place and are well prepared to handle diseases. At International SOS, we experienced this first hand with the Ebola outbreak in West Africa – travellers arriving to the UAE with suspected symptoms were swiftly and professionally managed by local authorities. No confirmed cases were reported.

International SOS continuously monitors emerging pandemic threats and has assisted many global and regional organisations in developing pandemic preparedness plans to support business continuity and risk mitigation. We support clients with up-to-date information on pandemic risks, which is essential for a company to respond in an informed way.

Our three decades of experience have consistently shown that companies with appropriate pandemic planning in place are better equipped to minimise the impact of any outbreaks, protecting their people, their organisational goals, and their insurers. One positive outcome of Zika would be that more companies put those plans in place. 

Dr Fanie Jute is Regional Medical Director with International SOS Dubai.