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New Singapore-based think-tank to prepare Asia for biological threats

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A newly launched academic think-tank, Asia Centre for Health Security (ACHS), aims to prepare Asia for current and emerging biological threats, as well as improve health security in the region.

"The focus includes all manner of catastrophic biological threats, rather than just zoonoses. So laboratory biosafety and deliberately released or man-made biological agents are also a part of our work," said the centre's director, Professor Hsu Li Yang.

"Rather than hardcore biomedical science and technology, we work on health systems, global health law and regulations, and global relations where it pertains to health security issues."

Prof Hsu is also the vice-dean of global health at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health at the National University of Singapore, where the new centre is primarily based.

Established with the help of generous philanthropic funding, ACHS is steered by a multidisciplinary team with expertise in areas from public health and clinical practice to global health law and policymaking.

It will work closely with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in areas such as research and training.

The launch, held at One Farrer Hotel on April 17, was attended by Adjunct Professor Derrick Heng, deputy director-general of health (public health) at the Ministry of Health.

"ACHS would be a useful complement to the evolving public health ecosystem in Singapore and the region's push for improved health security," Prof Heng said in his speech.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, Singapore has started to take the necessary steps to fortify its readiness against future infectious disease outbreaks, which are not a matter of if, but when, he said.

These steps include the setting up of the Communicable Diseases Agency (CDA) – announced by Health Minister Ong Ye Kung on March 21 – which will allow the Government to respond quickly to disease outbreaks as one concerted public health effort, he added.

In 2022, Singapore strengthened its pandemic research capabilities for developing tools, methods and products to respond to future disease threats with the launch of the Programme for Research in Epidemic Preparedness and Response.

In the same year, the Duke-NUS Medical School set up the Centre for Outbreak Preparedness to perform regional surveillance of pathogens with pandemic potential.

When the Covid-19 pandemic started, everyone saw how fragile preparedness was around the world, but there are more deadly viruses out there that are not yet capable of human-to-human transmission, said Professor Tom Inglesby, director of the Johns Hopkins Centre for Health Security at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in the US.

ACHS' launch was held in conjunction with the South-east Asia Strategic Multilateral Biosecurity Dialogue, a regional health security meeting that started in 2014, hosted by the US-based centre.

Increased global travel, climate change, population growth in both animals and humans, closer proximity to wildlife in urbanised areas, antibiotic overuse and human encroachment on pristine environments will raise the chances of spillover infections and new infectious disease crises, experts at the launch said.

To respond rapidly to the next pandemic, much work needs to be done, including ramping up diagnostic testing, and much faster development of medicine and vaccines, for instance, said Prof Inglesby.

"At the same time, we need to make sure these technologies don't lead to big accidents and are not used as weapons against us," he added.

This requires the set-up of good scientific governance and "common sense screening systems that keep people with bad intent from creating dangerous viruses from scratch", among other efforts, he said.

At ACHS, Prof Hsu will lead one workshop on leadership and communication during pandemics with regional participants in late May. Another workshop on laboratory biosafety will be held in September.

ACHS will also conduct outbreak simulation exercises where senior officials role-play being in different government positions responsible for dealing with the outbreak.

"Our aim is to have (the simulation exercise) in 2026, after learning from other organisations around the world doing these sorts of exercises," said Prof Hsu.

He said ACHS will add extra capacity and dimension to Singapore's response to future pandemics, including supporting its neighbours to be better prepared. It is already working with the National Centre for Infectious Diseases and the leadership of the future CDA in this regard.

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