Infectious Disease Threats: A Rebound to Resilience

The National Academy of Medicine convened the Vital Directions for Health and Health Care: Priorities for 2021 *initiative which, following a 2016 initiative of the same name, aims to provide expert guidance to the new presidential administration and nation on several focus areas for U.S. health policy. The following highlights the Vital Directions 2021 article on infectious disease threats, published in* Health Affairs *in January 2021. Visit* nam.edu/VitalDirections *for more information.*

Overarching Challenges of Infectious Disease Threats

The incidence of emerging infectious diseases has been increasing in frequency since 1970, including the virus responsible for COVID-19. The U.S. response to COVID-19 identified critical deficiencies in current pandemic preparedness and in particular the following existing challenges:

Systemic disparities. The rise in COVID-19 cases was accelerated by systemic inequities within the U.S. population. The impacts of epidemic diseases are disproportionately experienced by already marginalized population groups. COVID-19 has demonstrated that health care inequity in the U.S. is a public health threat to all Americans.

Governance challenges. COVID-19 has revealed critical barriers in national policy and governance that hinder U.S. pandemic preparedness and response. In addition, the ability of the U.S. to represent our interests in international pandemic preparedness will be significantly affected by our future approach to multilateralism, engagement with the World Health Organization, and collaborative global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lack of a coordinated, multisectoral strategy. One Health is a breaking down of public health siloes among livestock, domestic animal, wildlife, and human health and the environment, to better address health threats that include infectious diseases. This approach is particularly pertinent for pandemics, given the predominantly animal origins of emerging pathogens. The adoption of this approach in our international health efforts would help address the global nature of pandemic emergence.

Policy Priorities

1. Rapidly launch an independent expert Pandemic Preparedness & Response Commission.
2. Strengthen and modernize the U.S. health and public health systems.
3. Renew U.S. status as a global public health leader and partner.
4. Reinforce a science-based approach to public health policy.
5. Allocate necessary federal funding and ensure political independence to agencies involved in pandemic preparedness and control.
6. Support national and global engagement in One Health and other efforts to mitigate the underlying drivers of pandemics.

Ultimately, these steps by policymakers will help the U.S. anticipate and respond to pandemic threats, begin to correct deficiencies and improve equity in the U.S. health care and public health systems, regain international standing as a global health leader, and support a rebound to resilience to meet the challenges of a post-COVID-19 world.