

# Top ten global health threats for 2019: the WHO list

*Iftikhar Qayum*

**Submitted**

June 05, 2019

**Accepted**

June 25, 2019

**Author Information**

*Dr. Iftikhar Qayum*  
Director Medical Research  
Rehman Medical College  
Peshawar, Khyber  
Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan  
Email:  
iftikhar.qayum@rmi.edu.pk

**Citation:** Qayum I. Top ten global health threats for 2019: the WHO list. [Editorial]. J Rehman Med Inst. 2019 Apr-Jun;5(2):1-2.

**ABSTRACT**

With the shifting geological dynamics of the planet and its burgeoning population, spurred on by the race of progress, it is anticipated that new threats to global health will be emergent each year. This article discusses some of the key areas identified by the World Health Organization that would demand immediate attention in 2019.

*The author declared no conflict of interest, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The state of health on our planet exists in a precarious balance, ever threatened by even seemingly innocuous changes in the environment, the resources we draw upon, or even elements that we did not know existed before they become suddenly apparent. Despite all the scientific advances in knowledge and its application for human health, much more is unknown about the real underpinnings of health and disease. It is only in the last few centuries that human knowledge focused on discovering the mechanisms that sustain our life and health, as well as how we succumb to disease. Concomitant with the amassing of knowledge, attempts were made to organize it into actionable chunks that later on progressed to programs and policies.

In recent times, predictions can be made about health issues that are likely to loom large on the foreseeable future and many governmental and non-governmental agencies take an active part in not only predicting future health issues but also recruiting resources and allocating funds to tackle the menace efficiently and in a timely manner.

The global health watchdog, World Health Organization (WHO), issues various bulletins and guidelines to enable global efforts for disease coping or eradication, as the case may be. For 2019, the WHO issued a list of the top ten health issues (January 2019) that should concern all health professionals and institutes, and motivate them to undertake appropriate research or interventions to lessen the burden of disease.<sup>1,2</sup>

At the top of the list is Air Pollution and Climate Change, and rightly so, because this affects every life form on the planet. According to the WHO post, nine out of ten persons on the planet are breathing polluted air, with the lungs becoming the entry portal for all sorts of pollutants to enter the blood

stream and cause damage to general and specific body organs. More important, the main cause of this pollution is burning of fossil fuels, something within our control, should we wish to eradicate this major cause of morbidity and mortality. It is estimated that between 2030 and 2050 an estimated 250,000 deaths will augment the current 7 million annual deaths due to environmental pollution.

Second on the top ten list are Non Communicable Diseases (NCD) such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease, that account for 70% of global mortality (about 14 million people). Contributory to the NCD are use of tobacco and alcohol, unhealthy diets, sedentary lifestyles, and environmental pollution; once again, factors that can be controlled.

Third, WHO predicts a global Influenza Pandemic but cannot state precisely when it will happen, or how severe it will be. It is, meanwhile pursuing a monitoring and surveillance system with the help of several nations to identify potential Influenza viruses that are likely to be the causative agent(s).

On the fourth position are fragile and vulnerable settings; these are defined as areas of the planet where repeated or prolonged natural / man-made calamities / crises have weakened existing health care systems leaving people with little or no access to effective health care resources. The WHO is working to provide much needed support and develop the resources.

Antimicrobial resistance takes fifth place on the WHO list. Citing drug resistant tuberculosis, a phenomenon that causes 10 million people to fall ill, and 1.6 million to die each year, the WHO makes a strong case for rational use of antibiotics in human diseases, but also identifies the use of antibiotics in the animal industry (especially for food) as major sources of emergent drug resistant microbes. WHO plans to launch awareness campaigns encouraging prudent use of antibiotics, and reducing infections.

High threat pathogens, such as Ebola, Hemorrhagic Fevers, Zika, Nipah, MERS and SARS, come at number six as global threats according to WHO. It is feared that such pathogens could take on epidemic proportions. WHO calls on all nations to develop emergency preparedness plans for unknown epidemic-like illnesses as a real possibility.

The seventh slot goes to weak primary health care systems, and rightly so, because strong primary health care provides a sustainable defense against preventable diseases and in addition, raises the possibility of universal health coverage at affordable, comprehensive, and sustainable levels. The WHO target for 2019 is to work with such nations towards strengthening their primary health care systems and meet the commitments declared by the participating nations in the 2018 Astana Conference held by WHO in Kazakhstan.

The problem of vaccine hesitancy has not escaped WHO listing as the eighth major health threat to overcome in 2019. Vaccine hesitancy threatens to reverse the progress made in controlling or eradicating vaccine-preventable diseases, which currently prevents 2-3 million deaths annually; a further 1.5 million deaths could be prevented if there were improved vaccine coverage. Reasons for vaccine hesitancy include complacency, inconvenient access to vaccines, and lack of confidence in vaccination; health workers remain the mainstay for overcoming these factors. WHO hopes that 2019 will be the year that Polio is eradicated in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and will work towards increased HPV vaccination against cervical cancer as well.

Dengue and HIV take the ninth and tenth positions respectively on the WHO list.

WHO estimates that about 40% people on the planet are at risk for Dengue with about 300 million infections occurring per year;

mortality is 20% for patients with severe dengue. The disease is rampant in countries with long rainy seasons such as Bangladesh and India, but recently is spreading to more temperate areas such as Nepal. WHO, through a targeted strategy, aims to reduce Dengue deaths by up to 50% by 2020.

As for HIV, despite enormous progress made at the therapeutic and preventive fronts, the HIV epidemic still rages globally, killing about a million people every year. Since its advent, HIV has killed more than 35 million people out of the 70 million who acquired the disease; currently 37 million people are living with the disease. Young girls and women (ages 15-24 years) are being increasingly affected, accounting for 25% of HIV infections in sub-Saharan Africa. For 2019, WHO intends to introduce the facility of self-testing for HIV so that more people can know their disease status and get treatment accordingly.

All in all, 2019 has great and diverse challenges in store that should be taken seriously and tackled effectively and with the motivation to do away with traditional status quos that maintain the threat of disease looming over an otherwise healthy and vibrant planet. The concerted effort of all governments and health agencies is the only plausible approach to make the planet revive its healthy status and support a variety of life in abundance. To start with, the realization that most of these issues are man-made and controllable, should provide ample motivation to succeed in this mission.

---

## REFERENCES

1. World Health Organization. Ten threats to global health in 2019. [Webpage]. Accessed June 02, 2019. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>.
  2. Scheres J, Kuszewski K. The Ten Threats to Global Health in 2018 and 2019. A welcome and informative communication of WHO to everybody. *Zdrowie Publiczne i Zarządzanie* 2019;17(1):2-8.
-