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PUBLIC HEALTH SPECIALISTS STAND BY FOR DISASTERS

A flying squad of public health specialists has been officially launched in Melbourne, bringing together Australia's best experts who can rush to emergencies and disasters around the country and the world to stop the spread of infectious disease.

The group of specialist epidemiologists has already shown its value, with several experts sent to respond to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, where they played a key role monitoring community's health and stopping epidemic-prone disease from spreading and killing more people.

"The aftermath of a major disaster can often be a dangerous time," said the group's co-chair, Dr Martyn Kirk from the ANU National Centre for Epidemiology and Public Health.

"People who have suffered one disaster can find themselves caught up in a disease outbreak with disastrous consequences, particularly if water, food and health supplies have been disrupted."

After the 2010 Haiti earthquake, an outbreak of cholera killed more than 8,000 people.

Dr Kirk said the new network provides a ready supply of highly qualified professionals to volunteer with early detection and response to epidemics of diseases such as cholera, hepatitis, influenza, malaria and dengue.

The rapid-response network is a collaboration between the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, Sydney's University of New South Wales (UNSW), and Melbourne's Burnet Institute.

Its members include doctors, nurses, veterinarians, scientists and public health officials from around Australia. The network was founded by graduates of Masters of Applied Epidemiology (MAE) program at the ANU.

Known as the ARM network (Australian Response Masters of Applied Epidemiology), the group is on standby for emergencies in Australia and for requests from the World Health Organization and other international bodies for response to infectious diseases emergencies around the world.

The MAE program accepts around 10 scholars a year, who provide a surge capacity to Australian governments in the event of a public health emergency. The scholars attend regular sessions over two years at ANU.

Those sent to disasters must complete United Nations' (UN) security training.

The ARM program is funded by in-kind support from the ANU, UNSW and Burnet Institute.

Co-Director Raina MacIntyre, Professor of Infectious Diseases Epidemiology and Head of the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at UNSW, said the ARM filled a critical gap in Australia's surge response capacity for infectious diseases outbreaks that cross state and international borders.

"We have many skilled professionals who are willing to deploy in emergencies, but previously had no avenue to do so," Professor MacIntyre said.

"As Australians we are in a good position to provide leadership in regional infectious disease control, and ARM shows that this can be achieved with goodwill and the in-kind support of the three institutions."

Co-Director Dr Tony Stewart, Burnet Institute Senior Research Fellow and current Chairperson of the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network's Steering Committee, said the international community relies heavily

on well organised networks to maintain a cohort of trained and experienced professionals who can respond at short notice to large public health emergencies.

“Through ARM, we are now able to better match the people with the appropriate skills with requests for assistance from a range of sources,” Dr Stewart said.

Associate Professor Linda Selvey, Director of Epidemiology and Biostatistics in the School of Public Health at Perth’s Curtin University, went to Manila to help with the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan.

Dr Selvey was in charge of monitoring for outbreaks of diseases such as dengue fever and measles following the disaster, and coordinating a rapid response to any signs of disease.

“This disaster could easily have been much worse for many people,” Dr Selvey said. ‘The WHO and Department of Health put a lot of work in to prevention of disease, with vaccination programs and mosquito control efforts, particularly in areas where water and sanitation was affected,” she said.

The actions helped limit the impact of measles and dengue outbreaks.

“They were spotted early. Given the size of the disaster and the number of people involved, the Philippines authorities managed it very well and it was remarkable what could be achieved to prevent a wider disaster,” she said.

FOR INTERVIEWS

To arrange interviews, contact Jane O’Dwyer from ANU on 0416 249 231

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