

BEIJING (April 1, 2009): Health officials gathered in Beijing yesterday warned against deadly drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis, which are spreading fastest in developing countries that lack the infrastructure to tackle the disease.

Over half of new cases of tuberculosis are resistant to multiple drugs right from the start, and not as a direct result of substandard treatment, the head of the World Health Organisation (WHO) warned.

"This is the true alarm bell. This tells us that resistant strains are now circulating in the general population, spreading widely and largely silently in a growing pool of latent infection," director-general Margaret Chan said.

"Obviously this is a situation set to spiral out of control. Call it what you want, a time bomb or a powder keg, any way you look at it this is a potentially explosive situation."

According to the WHO, of nine million new TB cases annually, about 490,000 are multiple-drug resistant TB (MDR-TB) and about 40,000 are extensively drug resistant (XDR-TB) based on 2006 data.

People with XDR-TB, which has cropped up in 55 countries, have few treatment options and death rates are high.

The spread of those strains could compromise the global fight against tuberculosis, which relies on drugs developed decades ago.

"The situation is already alarming, and is poised to grow much worse very quickly," Chan said.

China announced steps to provide health coverage for people suffering from drug-resistant tuberculosis, helping to close a gap that has allowed the more deadly strain of the disease to take hold.

China's measures, funded by a US\$33 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation, include more affordable treatment at hospitals, quicker tests for the strains of tuberculosis that are resistant to standard treatment, and follow-up for patients to make sure they take their medicine.

China ranks second among countries with high rates of MDR-TB, just after India. If not cured, patients can infect 10 to 15 people a year, according to the WHO.

Health officials from 27 countries with high MDR-TB rates gathered in Beijing to work out new strategies. Their nations account for about 85% of all cases.

Many people aren't being detected, and fewer than 3 percent world-wide are being treated according to WHO recommendations.

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