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Editorial

Anticipating Another Global Pandemic?

The world is still reeling under the pall of COVID-19 and its multiple variants that are wreaking havoc on the lives of the people worldwide and the reports of another global pandemic in the form of a monkeypox outbreak are seemingly worrisome, especially in the wake of World Health Organization (WHO) declaring monkeypox outbreak a public health emergency on 23 July. As of 27 July, 75 countries across the globe have reported 16,000 cases.

Undoubtedly, WHO's Emergency Committee of the International Health Regulations in a recent meeting concluded that the monkeypox outbreak had spread rapidly via new modes of transmission about which information is scant; nonetheless, WHO's Secretary-General has clarified that while the monkeypox outbreak is a public health emergency of international concern, the viral disease is concentrated primarily among homosexual males, especially those with multiple sexual partners. While pleading for the deployment of the right strategies to design and deliver effective information and services, and to adopt measures to protect the health, human rights, and dignity of affected communities, the WHO Secretary-General also warned against stigma and discrimination.

First reported in 1970 in Congo, monkeypox at that stage was considered endemic in nine countries of Africa; however, the outbreak of monkeypox in 2022 has spread across 75 countries most of which are non-endemic and that indicates its rapid transmissibility. As per media reports, the symptoms of monkeypox include high fevers, swollen lymph nodes, and rashes. For the time being, the WHO has not recommended any vaccines, the United States has commenced administering smallpox jabs from May this year, and the European Union has also recommended expeditious authorization of smallpox jabs. In accordance with the recommendations of the International Health Regulations that envisage five preconditions to declaring a public health emergency, the WHO chief laid out recommendations for four sets of countries that were categorized on the basis of their "epidemiological situation, patterns of transmission, and capacities." The first group comprises countries with no history of this virus or those that have not detected any cases for over 21 days. The recommendations for this group of countries are mostly focused on augmenting preparedness by streamlining surveillance, enhancing capacity, raising awareness, and providing training and facilitating communication through community support efforts and civil society groups.

The second group of countries consists of countries that have recently reported monkeypox cases amongst humans as well as human-to-human transmission, and the WHO recommended for this group of countries a coordinated response to stop human-to-human transmission and protect vulnerable groups from exposure along with setting up protocols to protect medical healthcare providers. The third group of countries comprises those countries that have reported animal-to-human transmission and for this group of countries the WHO has recommended a "one health" coordination mechanism at all levels of governance to investigate and monitor the outbreak. The fourth recommendation of the WHO is for those countries that have the manufacturing capacity for medical countermeasures calling upon them to increase diagnostic vaccine production and therapeutics capacities along with coordinating their responses with the WHO.

After having tackled COVID-19, India is said to be better placed in terms of healthcare in dealing with the emerging menace of the monkeypox outbreak. According to Dr. VK Paul, "There is no need to panic... Surveillance has been strengthened but it is also the responsibility of a citizen that if you're experiencing symptoms or somebody close to you is...it should be reported. Don't hide it, get treated." So far, India has reported four cases of monkeypox – three from Kerala and one from Delhi - and two suspected cases emerged from Uttar Pradesh and Hyderabad.

However, the global count is alarming because more than 16,000 cases have been recorded till the closing of July 2022, and Europe is seemingly the worst hit. The WHO, the CDC of the US, and the EU regulator have recommended vaccines used for smallpox to be administered as a preventive measure. However, the officials of the Union Ministry of Health of India have recently said that there are currently no plans to procure smallpox vaccines to guard against monkeypox infections in India. Undoubtedly, the deaths caused by monkeypox have been low as compared to COVID-19 but monkeypox still can be dangerous.

— BK

