Almost 100 years after the Spanish flu, experts say we are still not prepared

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A 100 years ago, history’s worst known infectious disease outbreak of the Spanish flu occurred in 1918.

The influenza virus H1N1 killed more than 50 million people and infected over 500 million people globally. In India, the death toll had touched nearly 17 million.

As this year marks the centenary of the 1918 pandemic, it has triggered one question: Are we ready to face such a large scale pandemic now?

An article published in The Lancet Infectious Diseases says the answer is no. The stand is echoed by medical experts in Mumbai,

where have the isolation facilities?
Where do we have enough protection gear?

JAYANTHI SHAstri
Microbiologist

which has seen the worst outbreak of H1N1 in 2009.

Major gaps

“We do not know what virus will cause the next pandemic, there is no way to rapidly develop and deploy an effective vaccine against a pandemic virus. Differences in quality of health systems hamper a prompt response, and surveillance data on influenza have major gaps,” the Lancet editorial stated adding that an influenza pandemic could only be managed with a rapid and effective response from both national governments and the international health community.

Influenza is a virus that is known to cause the flu. The different types of influenza include A, B and C.

The serotypes of influenza A virus like the H1N1, H5N1, H3N2, etc., have caused pandemics in humans.

“The infection passes from person to person through coughing, sneezing etc. In a country like ours which is so overcrowded, control is difficult,” said infectious diseases specialist Dr. Om Shrivastav. “How many people can we quarantine?” asks Dr Shrivastav.

“Where are the isolation facilities if such a pandemic arises? Do we have enough protection gear?” asked Dr. Jayanthi Shastri, head of microbiology at the civic-run Nair hospital.

Mumbai, for example, is equipped for testing, but who will go and do the tests if the cost remains high, she added.

Experts also emphasize the need of following coughing and sneezing etiquette, self quarantine in case of symptoms and avoiding self medication.