

Public health experts call for increased allocation of resources to pandemic preparedness after ‘limited’ response to COVID-19

Health-policy expert Vin Gupta said in a press conference Monday that more resources must be dedicated to pandemic preparedness so threats similar to the coronavirus can be faced more efficiently in the future.

While pre-existing pandemic procedures were enough to “raise the alarm” of COVID-19 at its outbreak, Gupta said the overall emergency response to the virus was by no means sufficient. Any preparations made in theory proved to be inadequate in reality, he said.

“I don’t think we’ve invested nearly enough in pandemic preparedness, the way we’ve invested in conventional military threats and averting those,” Gupta said. “And so, that is going to have to change because our threat landscape has changed.”

Gupta said research he previously conducted with the Harvard Global Health Institute and the Georgetown Center for Global Health Security, studying the 2014 Ebola epidemic response, predicted many of the problems of the coronavirus pandemic, such as an inadequate testing infrastructure for variants of the virus and a lack of funds in the World Health Organization.

Pandemic preparedness should also involve offering critical-care courses to other governments and militaries, said Gupta, who is a commissioned officer in the U.S. Air Force Medical Corps.

“Those types of training exercises I think we need more of,” Gupta said. “We need to share best practices with other emergency-response, frontline-response organizations across the world, so that we’re all operating from the same playbook.”

Pandemic preparedness began long before the spread of COVID-19. Prior to COVID-19, a team within the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation that focuses on pandemic mapping was studying how diseases may expand in a given area, said the institute’s Media Relations Officer Amelia Apfel.

“So they were looking a lot at how you would expect the disease to move, and then where health facilities were located and what it would take for people to get there,” Apfel said. “It was like the COVID work, where it was sort of computer modeling of those factors and how they might influence the spread of the pandemic.”

Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, said pandemic preparedness has gone through a “boom and bust cycle,” in which federal, state and local governments respond reactively in times of panic but neglect to act proactively otherwise.

The government did not fund the threat of a pandemic adequately, Adalja said, nor did it consider the threat a matter of national security. Consequently, when COVID-19 spread, there was no political will to face the pandemic directly and understand what it could mean, he said.

“I think it’s wrong to think that COVID-19 took us by surprise or that there was nothing there,” Adalja said. “There were multiple plans in place, multiple exercises done, to show just how unprepared the U.S. government would be, and most of that was ignored and not really thought to be an actuality that the government would face.”

The coronavirus is an opportunity to try and fix some of the existing deficiencies in pandemic preparedness, Adalja said.

“This pandemic touched everyone’s life,” he said. “ ... The average American does not want to tolerate this again.”

Gupta said in Monday’s press conference that the failure of the public-health infrastructure during COVID-19 is evident in the inadequacy of the initial supply chain for testing, stockpiling of masks and the shortage of ventilators and ICU beds.

“Just from a material standpoint and human-resources standpoint, our healthcare system is limited as to what it can do in the setting of a crisis,” Gupta said. “So that should scare us all.”

The loss of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars during the COVID-19 pandemic were the result of unpreparedness, Adalja said. Without increased resources for pandemic preparedness, he added, there will continue to be excess death and disruption to society.

“Biowarfare pandemics, now, is one of the biggest threats to global security — certainly, to our national security and our way of life,” Gupta said. “We have to put in more than we currently are investing in and we’ve invested a few billion dollars.”