It's time to end the cycle of panic and neglect – why we need a pandemic treaty and investment in vaccine research

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Despite significant global effort, the world has not yet defeated COVID-19. Millions of lives have been lost, we have had 2 years of global disruption, lives and livelihoods have been ruined and trillions of dollars have been spent to date. Despite this, the world is no more prepared than it was in 2019 for the emergence of another novel pathogen.

COVID-19 has shown us that no country is immune to the effects of a global pandemic and no country can take unilateral action to protect itself. However, some countries have been able to take actions that are not available to all. Vaccines have been deployed at scale, but sadly there have been export bans and privileged access by wealthy countries to technologies that would have prevented many deaths and much global suffering. There has also been uneven distribution of manufacturing and access to lifesaving diagnostics and therapeutics. We know that the risk from this uneven access increases the prospect of new variants of the virus, which could prolong the acute phase of the pandemic.

Low income countries have a vaccination rate of less than 5% (one or more doses), whereas wealthy countries such as Australia have achieved rates of 80% and higher (https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations). We need to 'walk and chew gum': protecting our citizens while ensuring others get access too.

This is a direct result of global under investment in preparation against health threats. Despite many reviews, gaps in the global health architecture remain and little has been done to enhance transparency and put in place the systems and tools needed to protect the world from future pandemics. An immediate focus on COVID-19 management is understandable but the people of the world expect more, and action needs to be taken now to ensure that we protect the health and welfare of all global citizens not just now but into the future.

It is unarguable that global mechanisms have been slow to respond and are not fit for purpose. Surveillance and early warning systems, financing mechanisms, investments in early vaccines, development of diagnostic technologies and capacity to rapidly scale up manufacturing are not up to the task. This means that the world cannot detect and prevent outbreaks before they become established nor move quickly to respond when they are widespread. There is no independent monitoring nor accountability. We have been slow to mobilise the resources to bring the acute phase of the pandemic to an end. A global pandemic treaty is needed to address these issues.

At the same time, immediate investment in pandemic preparation is needed. Although our efforts to produce vaccines have thankfully been successful this time, it is important to remember that years of research following SARS and on MERS gave us a platform to build on. We are fortunate that several global research initiatives bore fruit. In this context the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) is calling for an investment of US$3.5 billion over 5 years to do the research and development needed on priority pathogens – those which science tells us represent a real potential threat. Using this research and development we can be ready and speed the development and deployment of needed vaccines to 100 days, cutting the acute phase of any future pandemic and saving countless lives.

Breaking the cycle of panic and neglect now by agreeing to a pandemic treaty and investing for the future is needed to prevent a recurrence of the global effects of COVID-19.

Competing interests

None declared.