



The World Health Assembly rejected a proposal to increase membership fees in May.

## GLOBAL HEALTH

# Report prescribes strong medicine for WHO

Ebola failures show that difficult reforms are needed, an independent panel says

By Kai Kupferschmidt

**T**he World Health Organization (WHO) is still struggling to end the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. But in the wake of what many viewed as a sluggish response to the crisis, another battle is brewing—about the future role of the organization itself.

On 7 July, an independent panel delivered a scathing review of WHO's performance and proposed wide-ranging reforms that would enable the agency to better tackle the next major health crisis—from giving it more money and power to setting up a special, semi-independent emergency center. WHO “does not currently possess the capacity or organizational culture to deliver a full emergency public health response,” concluded the group, led by Dame Barbara Stocking, the former chief executive of Oxfam in the United Kingdom; it recommended that the agency be made “fit for purpose.”

But although many of the suggestions have been praised as sensible, WHO's complex, politicized governance structure and entrenched bureaucracy make the \$2 billion U.N. agency difficult to change. Just 2 months ago, for instance, the World Health Assembly (WHA)—the annual meeting of health ministers that is WHO's decision-making body—rejected a proposal by WHO Director-General Margaret Chan to increase member states' contribution fees by 5%, as the report recommends. Several other suggestions in the report were previously made by a panel that reviewed the H1N1 pandemic of 2009, but

were never implemented.

The new report, too, “might just die on paper,” says Joanne Liu, president of Doctors Without Borders (MSF), which has played a major role in the Ebola epidemic. “Everything at this stage is in the hands of the member states and how willing they are to give a second chance to WHO.”

The six-member panel, appointed by WHO's Executive Board in March, interviewed WHO sources and outside experts, met with representatives of relief organizations, and flew to the affected countries. It explored why WHO waited until 8 August 2014, when Ebola had already infected more than 1000 people, to declare the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, a status that triggers international action. Early warnings about the outbreak's scale within WHO were ignored, the panel found, partly because “WHO does not have an organizational culture that supports open and critical dialogue between senior leaders and staff or that permits risk-taking.”

In addition, local community leaders—whose collaboration would prove crucial to controlling Ebola—were engaged too late, deployments of staff and consultants in the field were too short, and communication with the media was ineffective.

The report's most far-reaching proposal is that WHO set up a new Centre for Health Emergency Preparedness and Response that would bring together WHO experts in outbreak control and those providing humanitarian assistance, two areas that are now separate. The center should be overseen by an

independent board and headed by “a strong leader and strategic thinker,” the report notes. It's a good proposal, says Norwegian epidemiologist Preben Aavitsland, the head of a researching and consulting company in Kristiansand, Norway. But WHO officials may resist the idea, because a strong emergency center could become a state within a state, he cautions. “It will be interesting to see whether that is followed up.”

Others say WHO does not need an internal capacity to mount a full-on response to every outbreak. Rather than expanding, the organization should depend more on external partners like the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—which has three times WHO's annual budget—or Public Health England, says David Heymann, a former WHO assistant director-general who is now at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. “To be sustainable, the workforce should be outside of WHO,” he says. “I would be totally against WHO increasing its staff to sit around and wait for outbreaks to occur.”

The report also stresses the need to boost countries' compliance with the International Health Regulations (IHR), which lay out the responsibilities of WHO and member states during outbreaks. Completely revised and modernized after the SARS outbreak of 2003, the current IHR require member states to have “core public health capacities”—such as laboratories and trained staff—to detect and fight infectious diseases. So far, only 64 of 193 member states have confirmed that they comply with these rules; WHO should develop a plan to bring all countries up to

speed, the report says.

That is easier said than done in dirt-poor countries where even basic medical services are lacking, Liu says. “It’s this long, huge shopping list of things that you are supposed to implement, with no prioritization,” she says. WHO should narrow the requirements down to the essentials, Liu argues. Aavitsland adds that developed countries should help foot the bill.

In addition, the report says, WHO should penalize countries that violate an IHR provision banning member states from issuing travel restrictions if WHO doesn’t deem them warranted. More than 40 countries imposed unnecessary restrictions during the Ebola outbreak, which hurt the economies in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, and made it harder to send people and supplies. The report recommends giving WHO the power to sanction such behavior and to take cases to the U.N. Security Council. But that requires countries to surrender some national powers, something politicians are notoriously reluctant to do. “The current IHR were the result of a political negotiation that took much time,” Heymann says. “In order to change them, there have to be new negotiations.”

A spokesperson for WHO says “several of the recommendations in the report have been addressed already or are being addressed.” For instance, the organization is looking seriously at establishing a new emergency center, he says. Whether any real change is possible will become clear at the next WHA in May 2016, Aavitsland says. The issue of WHO’s budget will surely come up again then as well. “Member states keep increasing their expectations of what WHO will deliver, in many areas, without giving the organization the means to fulfill these expectations,” he says. “I think member states will get what they pay for.”

In 2017, Chan, who has been criticized for being too conflict-averse, is stepping down; a new, more forceful personality at the helm could make a huge difference, says Ilona Kickbusch, an independent global health consultant based in Brienz, Switzerland, and one of the authors of the new report. A group looking at proposals to reform WHO’s governance has discussed limiting directors-general to one 7-year term instead of two 5-year terms, she says. Free of the need to be reelected, WHO leaders might find it easier to challenge member states.

Liu is hopeful that a stronger WHO will emerge from the soul-searching. “The reality is today, there is only one organization that has the legitimacy and the authority to call a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and that is not MSF, or the World Bank. It is WHO,” she says. “So they need to have the capacity to do that.” ■

## SCIENCE POLICY

# Russia targets Western ties

## Crackdown on “foreign agents” and “undesirable” groups threatens private support for science

By Vladimir Pokrovsky

The news last week that the Dynasty Foundation, Russia’s only private funder of scientific research, is closing its doors adds to a darkening prospect for philanthropic support of Russian science. The decision by the Dynasty Foundation’s council, announced 8 July in a terse one-sentence notice on Dynasty’s Russian-language website, came weeks after the Russian government had labeled Dynasty a “foreign agent” under a recently enacted law.

Zimin, funds the foundation from personal accounts held in Western banks. Zimin was infuriated and left Russia in early June. Dynasty’s governing council decided to try to keep operating without personal donations from Zimin, but it declared the foreign agent label “absolutely unacceptable.” The final straw came in mid-June, when a court fined Dynasty 300,000 rubles (about \$5500) for refusing to register as a foreign agent.

Anna Piotrovskaya, the foundation’s executive director, told the press that she cannot say exactly when it will close but that all of Dynasty’s obligations to current grantees



Russian parliamentarians Valentina Matviyenko and Konstantin Kosachev pushed for the new laws.

That move was part of what many see as a growing official crackdown on organizations the government considers subversive. A new mechanism, separate from the foreign-agent law, threatens to label such groups as “undesirable” and make collaborating with them illegal, potentially curtailing their support for scientists. “These two stories are very symptomatic and replicate each other,” says Mikhail Gelfand of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ (RAS) Institute for Information Transmission Problems in Moscow, one of Russia’s top biologists.

In May, the Russian Ministry of Justice added Dynasty to its list of foreign agents—a new designation for organizations that receive funding from the West (*Science*, 5 June, p. 1067)—on the grounds that Dynasty’s founder, telecommunications mogul Dmitry

will be fulfilled. Vladimir Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the Kremlin regrets that the foundation will be liquidated. But he said no one forced the closure.

Some Russian scientists, however, called the move outrageous. Zimin’s public humiliation was an “especially dishonorable action,” says Evgeny Onishchenko, a researcher at RAS’ Lebedev Physical Institute in Moscow. “He was unselfishly helping to develop and popularize science in Russia, but the authorities have ... publicly made a spy of him.”

As Dynasty’s board deliberated, Russian authorities were enacting even more draconian measures. A new law, which was passed in May and took effect in June, authorizes the Russian prosecutor general to label “undesirable” any group deemed to threaten the foundations of constitutional order, national