

WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

WASHINGTON - Think about the first cases of an influenza pandemic.

Or the initial spread of smallpox after it's released by terrorists.

Or chemical contaminants starting to leak into waterways.

Experts call such threats "emergent conditions," a technical term for "bad situations that could get a whole lot worse."

Indicators of potentially devastating illnesses, terrorist attacks or other public health threats may be subtle at first.

So state and local officials should be required to quickly report certain kinds of information to federal officials who can connect the dots, see what's happening and respond in a hurry, said Dr. Steven Hinrichs, director of the University of Nebraska Center for Biosecurity.

The center, administered by the NU Medical Center, was established in 2002 to serve the state of Nebraska and the nation by addressing both human and agricultural biosecurity concerns. Among its missions is supporting the rapid collection and analysis of data critical to early detection of possible bioterrorism events.

The problem, Hinrichs said, is that standards for reporting disease outbreaks and other emerging threats vary widely from state to state.

And states are not required to report such information to the federal government, he said.

U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel and U.S. Rep. Lee Terry introduced legislation Thursday aimed at addressing Hinrichs' concerns. The Republican lawmakers from Nebraska said there are vulnerabilities in the system that need to be addressed.

The focus on the issue came at Hinrichs' request, Hagel said.

The legislation would create an advisory board to develop uniform guidelines on what must be reported to the federal government. It also would establish an electronic, centralized reporting system to analyze emerging conditions.

Hinrichs said some object to the proposal as an infringement on states' rights. But he said the current situation is a hazard to public health.

It's true that officials may decide to get on the phone when they see a rash of influenza cases, he said, but in many states, reporting of influenza isn't even mandatory.

"It's good medicine, good health, but it's not required," Hinrichs said. "I think that's crazy."

Hinrichs also pointed to the large cast of agencies currently involved in monitoring developing situations.

He cited West Nile virus. When a horse is infected with West Nile , it's considered an agriculture issue.

But the mosquito that gets infected from biting the horse is regarded as an environmental problem.

And the human who contracts the disease after being bitten by the mosquito is the responsibility of other departments.

The hope is that setting up a central collection point for all that information will translate into a better response to emerging threats.

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