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The World Health Organization (WHO) presents its compliments to Member States and has the honour to request support with addressing a matter of concern during the period of the COVID-19 response.

Even with COVID-19 prevailing, the threat of influenza persists. Each year, seasonal influenza can cause 3–5 million severe cases and up to 650 000 respiratory-related deaths worldwide. The co-circulation of influenza and COVID-19 can worsen the impact on health systems that are already overwhelmed. In addition, pandemic influenza could emerge any moment anywhere, and thus constant vigilance is critical. Since 1952, the Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS), a public health network coordinated by WHO, has supported global influenza prevention and control and has been leveraged for the COVID-19 response since it emerged.

WHO has recently observed a sharp decrease in influenza testing, reporting, and sharing of viruses and data. Given the ongoing threat of influenza, all Member States are requested to remain vigilant for influenza, including seasonal influenza virus variants or influenza viruses with pandemic potential, and to maintain routine influenza vaccination programmes to protect the vulnerable.

WHO extends particular thanks to those 122 Member States hosting a GISRS National Influenza Centre (NIC) for their continuous support and encourages them to: (1) resume or maintain routine influenza sentinel surveillance to monitor the trend and co-circulation of influenza and other respiratory viruses, including COVID-19; (2) ensure the NIC has the resources for the timely and optimal collection, testing, and sharing of influenza virus materials with WHO collaborating centres; (3) resume or maintain timely and routine reporting of influenza virological and epidemiological surveillance data to global or regional platforms; and (4) as possible, screen routine sentinel surveillance specimens for COVID-19 as an essential component of COVID-19 surveillance and report data to WHO through global or regional influenza platforms.

WHO will be pleased to provide guidance and technical assistance as needed to assist countries with preparing for the upcoming influenza seasons and leveraging GISRS for COVID-19 surveillance and will be grateful for Member States' commitment to implement these requests.

Clarification or questions regarding this process can be addressed to Ms Ann Moen, Chief, Influenza Preparedness and Response (moena@who.int).

The World Health Organization takes this opportunity to renew to Member States the assurance of its highest consideration.

GENEVA, 22 July 2020

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