

Exclusive: Top WHO disease detective warns against return to national lockdowns

By Sarah Newey, Global Health Security Reporter 1 August 2020 • 9:30pm

The World Health Organisation has urged countries not to reimpose national lockdowns in an attempt to stem the spread of Covid-19 due to the health, social and economic repercussions.

In an exclusive interview with The Telegraph Dr Maria Van Kerkhove, who helps lead the WHO's pandemic response team as the head of the emerging diseases unit, said that countries should instead adopt localised strategies.

By the end of March, as the coronavirus outbreak spiralled out of control across the globe, well over 100 countries had imposed a full or partial lockdown – affecting billions of people.

Dr Van Kerkhove described these measures as a “blunt, sheer force instrument” that bought countries time to build the public health infrastructure needed to tackle Covid-19.

But reflecting on events since the WHO declared a [global health emergency six months ago](#) – when fewer than 8,000 cases and 170 deaths had been reported – she added that the economic, health and social costs of lockdown have been “massive”.

Advertisement

“Lockdowns are not something that WHO recommended, but they needed to be used in a number of countries because the outbreaks were growing so quickly,” Dr Van Kerkhove said. “But we're hopeful that countries will not need to implement national lockdowns again.”



A usually busy Regent Street in the heart of London stood empty in March,

at the height of the UK's lockdown, when millions of people were asked to leave home only for basic shopping, exercise and essential travel to work

Credit: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

The 43-year-old, who has become a familiar face having appeared alongside WHO chief Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at press briefings for months, added that countries should not rely on a jab as a silver bullet to bring the raging pandemic to a close.

“In the next six months we will not have a vaccine,” she said frankly. “I know there's a lot of [work that's being accelerated](#) in terms of having a safe and effective vaccine, but we cannot wait until next year for one to come around.”

Instead Dr Van Kerkhove urged countries to make use of the tools currently available to adopt a “tailored, specific, localised” approach to contain new clusters of infections.

“The speed of the science on this has been extraordinary... we have tools right now that can prevent transmission and save lives,” Dr Van Kerkhove said, referencing measures including contact tracing, widespread testing, equipping health facilities, physical distancing and wearing face masks.

“It isn't one measure alone, all of the existing measures need to be used together. And it works. The reason we keep saying that it works is because we've seen this happen, we have seen countries bring these outbreaks under control,” she said.



A worker in a protective suit at the Huanan market in Wuhan in January, which was initially linked to the first known coronavirus cases Credit:

DARLEY SHEN/Reuters

It is now seven months since Dr Van Kerkhove – who has spent decades training as an epidemiologist, including stints at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Imperial College – received an email alert that a [‘pneumonia of unknown origin’](#) had been detected in Wuhan, China.

“I was on holiday for Christmas with my family in the US,” the mother of two told the *Telegraph* from her office at the WHO headquarters in Geneva. “I immediately sent a note back asking some questions, which I always do... we always push countries for more information, China is not unique to that.

“My initial feeling was that this could be localised, that this would be localised. But I’m trained to think that this is an emerging infectious disease... so I definitely knew it could get bigger, and planned for that.”

Since then the scenarios Dr Van Kerkhove’s team prepared for but dreaded have been realised. The pandemic has spiralled out of control internationally, with infections surpassing 17.6 million and deaths 680,000, not to mention the devastating social and economic reverberations.

And the epidemiologist, used to working behind the scenes, has instead been thrown into the limelight, having fielded hundreds of questions from journalists and the public at regular virtual briefings. At points this role as the public face of the WHO, which was not one Dr Van Kerkhove “ever expected” to have, has landed her in hot water.



From left - Dr Mike, Ryan director of the WHO health emergencies programme, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director general and Dr Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO technical lead for Covid-19 Credit: Fabrice Coffrini/Reuters

Though praised in January when she was one of the first WHO officials to raise the alarm about [potential human-to-human transmission publicly](#), comments that appeared to [suggest asymptomatic spread is rare](#) provoked fierce criticism in June – though Dr Van Kerkhove maintains that much of the reporting misunderstood her words.

“I watched videos of myself making a statement, and then some newscaster saying, ‘WHO says asymptomatic transmission doesn't happen’, which I've never said, which WHO has never said,” she said. “It was a challenge – I had never been the brunt of such criticism.”

Dr Van Kerkhove added that her colleagues, husband and two children – aged nine and one –

kept her going. “My nine year old drew rainbows for everybody at the office because he wanted everyone to know that we were doing a good job,” she said. “I’m inspired by acts of kindness.”

The epidemiologist is not the only member of the team to attract criticism during the pandemic. Most markedly, Donald Trump has consistently accused the WHO, [particularly Dr Tedros](#), of being “China-centric” – a claim most public health experts have dismissed as “scapegoating”.

The fallout, which began in early April when the US President announced he was [temporarily suspending funding to the UN health agency](#) because it “failed in its basic duty” to respond to Covid-19, came to a head earlier this month when Trump’s administration formally withdrew from the WHO.

As a “proud American” Dr Van Kerkhove said she was “disappointed” by the decision, but insisted that the worsening situation in the US, where more than 66,000 new cases have been reported every day in the last fortnight, could still be rectified.

“I think even countries that haven’t done as well still can turn it around, and I believe that the United States can and the United States will,” she said.

But her biggest fear is complacency, which could undermine efforts to control this pandemic – and the next one.

“This is a wake up call about pandemics and we must do more to be ready,” Dr Van Kerkhove warned. “It isn’t a matter of if, [it’s a matter of when](#) something like this will happen again.

“It’s quite traumatic what everyone is going through at the moment – we need to use this as a way to accelerate the change that is necessary.”

Protect yourself and your family by learning more about [Global Health Security](#)

Global Health Bulletin



Global Health Bulletin

Get the latest coronavirus news and advice as the outbreak continues