

Q&A: WHO representative addresses China's new virus outbreak

January 23 2020, by Sam McNeil



Dr. Gauden Galea, the World Health Organization (WHO) representative in China, speaks during an interview with The Associated Press at the WHO's offices in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 23, 2020. Galea said that "trying to contain a city of 11 million people is new to science," as Wuhan canceled departing trains and flights amid a viral outbreak that the representative said could infect thousands. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

Shortly before authorities closed off the Chinese city at the epicenter of an outbreak of a new virus, the World Health Organization sent a team led by country representative Gauden Galea to check conditions on the ground in Wuhan, an inland city of more than 11 million people.

The five-member team on Monday and Tuesday visited a local biosafety lab, a branch of China's Center for Disease Control, a hospital retrofitted with increased safety protocols and the airport. Galea spoke with health care workers, epidemiology inspectors and [city officials](#) who described and demonstrated how authorities are tracking, treating and combating the disease.

The Associated Press interviewed Galea at the WHO office in Beijing on Thursday.

Q: CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE SITUATION ON THE GROUND RIGHT NOW IN WUHAN?

A: It was very important for us to understand what was the extent of the outbreak and to get a bit of local color on the reports. It's one thing looking at dry tables and presentations, it's another thing to see it on the ground and meeting the front-line workers and getting their own experience of the outbreak. ... The situation has changed a lot already.

Q: TO CONTAIN AN OUTBREAK, IS THIS KIND OF TRAVEL BAN USUALLY EFFECTIVE? WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND SOME OF THE PITFALLS?

A: To my knowledge, trying to contain a city of 11 million people is new to science. It has not been tried before as a public health measure, so we cannot at this stage say it will or will not work. If this is happening we will note carefully to what extent it is maintained and how long it can take. There are pros and cons to such a decision. Such a decision

obviously has social and economic impacts that are considerable. On the other hand, it demonstrates a very strong public health commitment and a willingness to take dramatic action. It sends a message to Wuhan, to China and to the rest of the countries. It remains to be seen what its effect will be.



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Q: WERE YOU ABLE TO SEE HOW MANY PATIENTS WERE LOCATED AT THE HOSPITAL? DID IT SEEM LIKE THE RESOURCES WERE OVERWHELMED?

A: The numbers of cases being handled are indeed quite large. The hospital that we attended, Zhongnan Hospital ... had construction put in place since the epidemic was identified in order to be able to provide the right patient flows, the right triage for patients with fever. So that they all go through one direction and there isn't a mixture of patients. There's rapid identification of whether this is a known case with some condition that is more conventionally treated and whether this is a suspect case. These flows and procedures were demonstrated to us and we have to say that the example we have seen is very much good practice.

We have to commend the [health care workers](#) that we met, who are extremely well-informed, correctly using procedures and [personal protective equipment](#), who are very optimistic – cautious but optimistic – in their dealings both with us and with the patients that we saw being processed.



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Hospital staff wash the emergency entrance of Wuhan Medical Treatment Center, where some infected with a new virus are being treated, in Wuhan, China, Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2020. The number of cases of a new coronavirus from Wuhan has risen to over 400 in China health authorities said Wednesday. (AP Photo/Dake Kang)



Remarks	航班号 Flight	计划 STA	始发/经停站 From/Via	预计 ETA	状态 Remarks
	MU3325	14:05	Wuhan 武汉	14:05	取消
	MU3010	14:10	Guangzhou 广州	13:54	
	MU4115	14:10	Hangzhou 杭州	14:10	
	MU2107	14:15	Xi'an 西安	14:15	
	CZ6901	14:15	Urumqi 乌鲁木齐	14:11	
	HO3860	14:20		14:20	
	MF1063	14:25	Xi'an 西安	14:28	
	MU3399	14:25	Changsha 长沙	14:18	
	MU5227	14:40	Qingdao 青岛	14:40	
	CZ3962	14:40	Shenzhen 深圳	15:00	
		14:45	Nanjing 南京	14:45	
			Fuzhou 福州	14:45	
			Dalian 大连	14:35	

A display board shows a canceled flight arrival from Wuhan at Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 23, 2020. China closed off a city of more than 11 million people Thursday, halting transportation and warning against public gatherings, to try to stop the spread of a deadly new virus that has sickened hundreds and spread to other cities and countries in the Lunar New Year travel rush. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)



Staff move bio-waste containers past the entrance of the Wuhan Medical Treatment Center, where some infected with a new virus are being treated, in Wuhan, China, Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2020. The number of cases of a new coronavirus from Wuhan has risen over 400 in China Chinese health authorities said Wednesday. (AP Photo/Dake Kang)



Health Officials in hazmat suits check body temperatures of passengers arriving from the city of Wuhan Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2020, at the airport in Beijing, China. Nearly two decades after the disastrously-handled SARS epidemic, China's more-open response to a new virus signals its growing confidence and a greater awareness of the pitfalls of censorship, even while the government is as authoritarian as ever. (AP Photo Emily Wang)

Q: WE'VE SEEN MODELING AND EXPERTS SAYING THAT THERE WILL EVENTUALLY BE THOUSANDS OF CASES. HOW SERIOUS IS THIS GOING TO GET?

A: The numbers of cases are not in themselves a measure of seriousness. ... One of the patterns that we have seen is that as milder cases are

detected, there has been a reduction in the percentage of the rate of people dying but it is too early to reach a full conclusion.

We are now daily hearing of massive increases in the numbers. Part of that increase is coming from the processing of specimens earlier. Another part is a broadening of the case definition. So numbers are going to increase. Even if they are in the thousands, this would not surprise us. That is not an indicator of seriousness. Indeed it is very, very good to get and identify as many cases as possible.

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