

Title: The Emergency Declaration Process for Coronavirus Disease

Activities: National-level notification; Notification of IHR event; Declare outbreak nationally; Issue emergency declaration

Stakeholders: National and subnational health authorities; World Health Organization

Phases: Detection; Early response

Years: 2019-2020

Countries: China; United States of America

Agent: Coronavirus Disease

Case study prepared by: Madison Alvarez, February 20, 2020

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It is estimated that the first infections of a novel coronavirus occurred on December 12, 2019. Initial declarations of an outbreak occurred over the next three weeks.¹ Chinese officials officially reported a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan on December 31st.² The United States' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published warnings against exposure to the market suspected as the source of the outbreak on January 6th.³ The next day, the outbreak was confirmed to be a new strain of Coronavirus, later named Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19).⁴ On January 9th, the World Health Organization (WHO) published warnings of a "flu-like" outbreak in Wuhan,⁵ and, two days later, officials from Wuhan reported the first death related to the virus. They claimed no new cases had occurred since January 3rd, which was soon shown to be untrue.⁶

¹ Joseph, A. (2020, January 11). First death from Wuhan pneumonia outbreak reported. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from <https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/11/first-death-from-wuhan-pneumonia-outbreak-reported-as-scientists-release-dna-sequence-of-virus/>

² Holshue, M. L., DeBolt, C., Lindquist, S., Lofy, K. H., Wiesman, J., Bruce, H., ... Pillai, S. K. (2020). First Case of 2019 Novel Coronavirus in the United States. *New England Journal of Medicine*. doi: 10.1056/nejmoa2001191

³ Niiler, E. (2020, February 13). An AI Epidemiologist Sent the First Warnings of the Wuhan Virus. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from <https://www.wired.com/story/ai-epidemiologist-wuhan-public-health-warnings/amp>

⁴ Holshue, M. L., DeBolt, C., Lindquist, S., Lofy, K. H., Wiesman, J., Bruce, H., ... Pillai, S. K. (2020). First Case of 2019 Novel Coronavirus in the United States. *New England Journal of Medicine*. doi: 10.1056/nejmoa2001191

⁵ Niiler, E. (2020, February 13). An AI Epidemiologist Sent the First Warnings of the Wuhan Virus. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from <https://www.wired.com/story/ai-epidemiologist-wuhan-public-health-warnings/amp>

⁶ Joseph, A. (2020, January 11). First death from Wuhan pneumonia outbreak reported. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from

There is some concern about the following lag in reporting from Wuhan to China and from the WHO to the public. Mara Pillinger, an associate in global health policy and governance at Georgetown's O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law, fears that suppression of whistleblowers who first detected the disease's transmission halted the flow of information from Wuhan to Beijing. She and many others also suspect that, by this point, it was already known (by Wuhan and Beijing) that human-to-human transmission was occurring.⁷

Still, the seriousness of the outbreak soon became apparent. January 19th saw providers in the United States reporting a potential case to the CDC. The patient had reported to urgent care after seeing the CDC's published warnings.⁸ He was confirmed to have COVID-19 the next day, and China finally reported that human-to-human transmission was indeed occurring, infecting fourteen medical providers.⁹ The WHO soon announced that it would convene an emergency committee to discuss the outbreak.¹⁰

The emergency meeting occurred on January 23rd, at which the WHO declined to declare COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).¹¹ By this time, seventeen people had died and at least four counties had cases. The chair of the emergency committee cited the low number of patients outside of China and the quarantine of Wuhan¹² as reasons they did not yet consider the outbreak a global emergency.¹³ The Director General did

<https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/11/first-death-from-wuhan-pneumonia-outbreak-reported-as-scientists-release-dna-sequence-of-virus/>

⁷ Rauhala, E. (2020, February 9). Chinese officials note serious problems in coronavirus response. The World Health Organization keeps praising them. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinese-officials-note-serious-problems-in-coronavirus-response-the-world-health-organization-keeps-praising-them/2020/02/08/b663dd7c-4834-11ea-91ab-ce439aa5c7c1_story.html

⁸ Holshue, M. L., DeBolt, C., Lindquist, S., Lofy, K. H., Wiesman, J., Bruce, H., ... Pillai, S. K. (2020). First Case of 2019 Novel Coronavirus in the United States. *New England Journal of Medicine*. doi: 10.1056/nejmoa2001191

⁹ Hermesauto. (2020, February 3). Wuhan virus: China confirms human-to-human transmission, says medical workers infected. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/wuhan-virus-cases-hit-217-in-china-as-president-xi-jinping-pledges-to- curb-outbreak>

¹⁰ Hermesauto. (2020, February 3). Wuhan virus: China confirms human-to-human transmission, says medical workers infected. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from

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¹¹ Joseph, A. (2020, January 24). WHO declines to declare China virus outbreak a global health emergency. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from

<https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/23/who-declines-to-declare-china-virus-outbreak-a-global-health-emergency/>

¹² Moritsugu, K. (2020, January 26). Xi calls situation grave as China scrambles to contain virus. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from

https://democratherald.com/news/world/xi-calls-situation-grave-as-china-scrambles-to-contain-virus/article_6cf257b8-3f73-50b4-83cc-ff8b43a0ad7e.amp.html

¹³ Joseph, A. (2020, January 24). WHO declines to declare China virus outbreak a global health emergency. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from

<https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/23/who-declines-to-declare-china-virus-outbreak-a-global-health-emergency/>

recommend sending a team to monitor the situation and stressed that the necessity of a PHEIC would be constantly reassessed as more information became available.¹⁴ Two days later, on the Lunar New Year, President Xi Jinping called the outbreak a grave situation in an address to the Communist Party. He expressed concern that the holiday could exacerbate the epidemic.¹⁵

Seven days after its first meeting, the emergency committee reconvened. This resulted in the Director General officially declaring a PHEIC. By this point, there were almost eight thousand cases across eighteen countries. He believed this sharp increase merited an international response. The committee also expressed concern about the proliferation of travel restrictions, which several countries had implemented in violation of the International Health Regulations.¹⁶ Nearly 10,000 flights to China had been canceled in the past week alone.¹⁷ The WHO used the declaration process to discourage such measures as having little public health benefit.¹⁸

The next day, on January 31st, the US Health and Human Services Secretary Azar declared a national public health emergency. He did so stating that, while the risk of infection remained low for most Americans, the deployment of national resources was needed to keep that the case.¹⁹ This was immediately followed by a presidential proclamation barring entry for any Chinese nationals not directly related to US citizens, despite WHO recommendations.²⁰ The course of the outbreak will determine when these national and international emergency declarations will be terminated.

¹⁴ Joseph, A. (2020, January 24). WHO declines to declare China virus outbreak a global health emergency. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from <https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/23/who-declines-to-declare-china-virus-outbreak-a-global-health-emergency/>

¹⁵ Moritsugu, K. (2020, January 26). Xi calls situation grave as China scrambles to contain virus. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from https://democratherald.com/news/world/xi-calls-situation-grave-as-china-scrambles-to-contain-virus/article_6cf257b8-3f73-50b4-83cc-ff8b43a0ad7e.amp.html

¹⁶ Nuzzo, J. (2020, February 2). Perspective | Past epidemics prove fighting coronavirus with travel bans is a mistake. Retrieved February 25, 2020, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/02/03/fighting-coronavirus-with-travel-bans-is-mistake/>

¹⁷ 10,000 Chinese flights cancelled due to coronavirus - Cirium - A Smarter Way to Travel. (2020, January 31). Retrieved February 20, 2020, from

<https://www.cirium.com/thoughtcloud/nearly-10000-chinese-flights-suspended-as-coronavirus-outbreak-escalates/>

¹⁸ Joseph, A. (2020, January 24). WHO declines to declare China virus outbreak a global health emergency. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from

<https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/23/who-declines-to-declare-china-virus-outbreak-a-global-health-emergency/>

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2020, January 31). Secretary Azar Declares Public Health Emergency for United States for 2019 Novel Coronavirus. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/01/31/secretary-azar-declares-public-health-emergency-us-2019-novel-coronavirus.html>

²⁰ Proclamation on Suspension of Entry as Immigrants and Nonimmigrants of Persons who Pose a Risk of Transmitting 2019 Novel Coronavirus. (2020, January 31). Retrieved February 25, 2020, from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspension-entry-immigrants-nonimmigrants-persons-who-pose-risk-transmitting-2019-novel-coronavirus/>

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In the wake of the Coronavirus Disease outbreak, rapidly growing case count, geographic spread, and political debates around the efficacy of travel restrictions motivated local, national, and World Health Organization officials to issue emergency declarations. Uncertainty around the disease's nature and spread somewhat slowed this process.