



Doha

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Covid-19: Don't let economic crisis distract from preparing for a future pandemic, conference hears

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Most countries haven't learnt all the lessons of the covid pandemic and need to take further measures to ensure their health systems are resilient enough in the event of another pandemic, a conference on healthcare and innovation has been told.

The World Innovation Summit for Health (WISH) in Doha, Qatar, brought together health ministers and leaders from 136 countries to discuss key issues with global effects, including health systems resilience and pandemic preparedness.

In a keynote discussion Sarah Gilbert, who led the Oxford University and AstraZeneca team in developing a vaccine for covid-19, said she believed that in the future it would be possible to develop and scale up a vaccine for another pandemic in less than a year, now that the technology was in place as a result of covid-19. She said that the 26 vaccine production facilities around the world should be manufacturing covid and other vaccines for their local populations, to ensure equality of access to vaccines in any future pandemics.

"Many pharma companies have reduced their manufacturing of vaccines since the beginning of the year due to reduced demand, but we need to ensure that production capacity is maintained to guard against a future pandemic," said Gilbert.

Richard Hatchett, director of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness and Innovation (CEPI), agreed that since the rapid rollout of the AstraZeneca vaccine it should be possible to further reduce scale-up times. He outlined the coalition's "100 day challenge" for manufacturers to cut times to less than four months.

"This could be achievable in view of the fantastic efforts of the vaccine companies during covid, if we have the teams and access to technology in place," he said.

Holm Keller, chair of the Kenup Foundation, a Malta based healthcare innovation non-governmental organisation, said that some companies were developing purpose based, pre-designed laboratories and facilities that could be shipped to developing countries. He said that the German company BioNtech had developed "biotainers" that could be transported to other countries.

However, some at the summit expressed concern that politicians had moved pandemic preparedness down the list of priorities, as most countries in Europe and elsewhere tried to deal with economic and energy crises.

Hatchett said he was optimistic that countries would respond more effectively in future but was "concerned about politicians being preoccupied with other issues."

Gilbert said, "We are already seeing investment moving away from pandemic preparedness, and I hope politicians don't take their eye off the ball."

Last December health leaders agreed to start a process to draft and negotiate a convention, agreement, or other international instrument under the Constitution of the World Health Organization to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response.

In a separate discussion at the Doha conference a WHO spokesman said that the proposed pandemic treaty (bmj.com/global-pandemic-treaty) may require a new body to enforce its provisions to be agreed by countries signing up and that there would need to be penalties against countries that did not fully implement the treaty once it was agreed.

He said this was the only way to ensure that a standardised approach was taken to dealing with another covid-type pandemic.