Embracing the One Health Approach Post-COVID-19: A Call for Integrated Action

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The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health, emphasizing the need for a holistic and collaborative approach to address global health challenges. As the likely origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus from wildlife illustrates, health threats can emerge from the animal kingdom and cripple human societies and economies (1). This experience suggests we need a coordinated, multisectoral approach to health - an approach encompassed in the One Health framework.

In a One Health approach, multiple sectors - public health, veterinary medicine, agriculture, environment, etc. - work together to attain optimal health for people, animals, and our shared environment. It involves designing and implementing programs, policies, legislation, and research in a way that recognizes these connections. The goal is to achieve better public health outcomes than the prevailing siloed approach while promoting environmental resilience and sustainability (2).

There are several reasons why implementing One Health is more viable in a post-COVID world. First, policymakers and public health leaders now grasp the reality that animal viruses do not respect species barriers. About 75% of emerging human infectious diseases originate in animals. With globalization and ecological changes, animal-human spillovers that spark pandemics are likely to become more frequent (3). Applying a One Health lens would strengthen prediction, prevention, and preparedness by monitoring threats at the human-animal interface.

Second, organizations worldwide now understand pandemics' catastrophic social and economic impacts. COVID-19 prompted the commitment of trillions of dollars for response and recovery efforts. Investing resources into One Health implementation could yield substantial dividends by identifying and mitigating risks before they ignite crises. According to the World Bank, the cost of preventing pandemics while following One Health principles ranges from $10.3 billion to $11.5 billion per year. This is significantly lower than the cost of managing pandemics, which was estimated by the G20 Joint Finance and Health Taskforce to be around $30.1 billion per year (4).

Third, while institutional silos have impeded progress, the COVID-19 experience has broken down barriers for collaboration. Governments, academia, NGOs, and Industry have been cooperating across disciplines in ways never seen before. These relationships and data-sharing platforms built during the pandemic can facilitate improved, coordinated action in the future.

What might One Health implementation entail? At the national level, governments could establish high-level One Health offices to coordinate policymaking. All health-related agencies could have leadership liaisons in these offices to identify synergies and co-develop priorities. For addressing zoonotic diseases, joint teams with public health officials, veterinarians, and environmental specialists could bolster frontline surveillance at major livestock production regions and wildlife trade areas. Border management is a critical aspect, and there is a need for coordinated efforts between countries to monitor and control the movement of people, animals, and goods across borders. This includes implementing effective quarantine measures, joint surveillance programs, and information sharing to detect and respond to potential threats promptly.

Governments should also incentivize academic One Health programs and research through dedicated funding channels. Key focus areas could include understanding ecological drivers of emerging infections, evaluating climate change impacts on disease emergence, and performing socioeconomic analyses to identify effective interventions.

Legal frameworks and policies should also be enacted to formalize and facilitate data integration across human health, animal health, and environmental sectors for regular analysis. Such policy platforms have been implemented in several European countries to great effect.

Of course, realizing One Health requires buy-in amongst stakeholders. Therefore, governments should actively promote One Health literacy across various industries to highlight the win-wins. The livestock sector must understand that early disease detection in animals protects their bottom line. The environmental sector must recognize that conservation policies support human health objectives. One Health demonstrates that societal objectives often align when we broaden our perspectives.

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While informal collaborations have supported previous One Health responses to crises like Ebola and Zika, the post-COVID world provides the impetus to implement structural, systemic changes for fully realizing One Health. The pandemic experience and awakening to our global interconnectedness allow us to purposefully re-organize for the long-term health and security of human populations and the ecosystems we depend upon. As a global community and at a national level, it is incumbent upon us to foster collaboration across sectors and disciplines, promote sustainable practices, prioritise this in our pandemic preparedness efforts, and invest in research and education to build a healthier and more resilient world.

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References