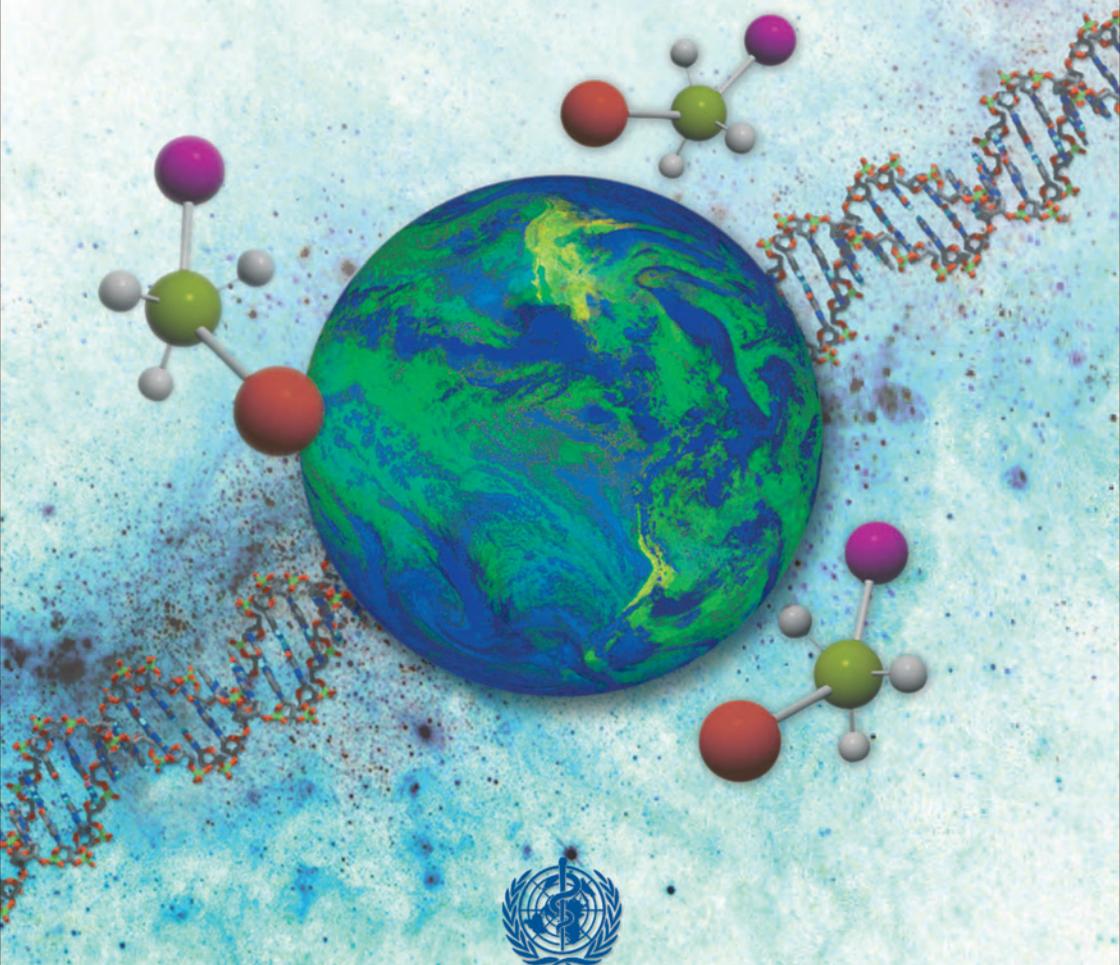


Public health response to biological and chemical weapons

WHO guidance



World Health Organization

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FOREWORD

The message contained in this publication is clear: countries need a public health system that can respond to the deliberate release of chemical and biological agents. Regrettable though this message may be, the use of poison gas in the war between Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran in the 1980s, the recent anthrax incidents in the United States, and the attack with sarin nerve agent, six years earlier, on the Tokyo underground, illustrate why it is necessary to prepare.

Recognizing this need, the Fifty-fifth World Health Assembly in May 2002 adopted resolution WHA55.16 calling on Member States to “treat any deliberate use, including local, of biological and chemical agents and radionuclear attack to cause harm also as a global public health threat, and to respond to such a threat in other countries by sharing expertise, supplies and resources in order rapidly to contain the event and mitigate its effects.” This is but the first step. The need has been identified. What is now required are national and international procedures to meet it, suitably resourced.

This manual describes these procedures. Written 30 years after WHO published its first report on the subject, the new volume could not be more timely. Lessons learned about the consequences following deliberate use of chemical and biological agents in a range of wars and in other crimes, serve as the foundation for its recommendations.

One consistent theme is evident throughout. It is the importance of using existing systems to protect public health and to augment these where appropriate. For example, better disease surveillance locally, nationally, and internationally will provide a surer way of detecting and responding to unusual disease outbreaks than a system geared only to detect deliberate release of candidate biological warfare agents. Similar principles apply for the provision of health care; management of health emergencies, delivery of clean water or protecting food supplies.

For those charged with protecting the health of the public and who now have also to be concerned about the deliberate use of chemical and biological warfare agents, this manual will prove invaluable. As the former Executive Director of WHO Communicable Diseases, I am glad to have been associated with this publication and welcome and support what it has to say.



Dr David L. Heymann

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