Influenza viruses and public health in the first decade of twenty first century

The first decade of twenty first century experienced an unusual threat from Influenza viruses, worldwide. It started with the emergence of a new virus, Influenza A H5N1, as a causative agent of the highly fatal disease in poultry in Asia. Soon the virus was associated with a highly fatal human disease. The virus spread in many parts of Asia, Europe and the Middle East. International and national agencies projected a serious and unprecedented threat due to this virus and the virus was projected as a candidate for the next pandemic. By the end of the decade a pandemic was caused by not this virus but another H1N1 virus that jumped from swine to humans.

India experienced 3 major introductions of H5N1 viruses and many poultry outbreaks due to them. We also experienced the H1N1 pandemic with high morbidity and mortality. The diagnosis and management of large number of human cases required political will, diagnostic laboratories, large resources in term of doctors, paramedical staff, medicines, vaccines, hospitalization and above all communication between patients and various agencies. The lessons learnt have elevated our preparedness for management of not only influenza but other fatal communicable epidemics/pandemics.