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First global SARS meeting

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KUALA LUMPUR - Some 2000 scientists and health experts are [meeting in Kuala Lumpur](#) (June 17-18) to discuss severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). According to David Heymann, [Director of Communicable Diseases](#) at the World Health Organization (WHO), the meeting has two objectives. "The first is to let the [countries with SARS outbreaks exchange ideas](#) about how they were controlled, and the second to see where we go next in research, continuous surveillance and all those activities that must continue now that the outbreak is apparently under control," Heymann told us.

"And we hope this type of cooperation will become the norm rather than the exception. We've been developing this approach for the past seven or so years...we're hoping this can become routine," said Heymann.

Asked whether another objective of the meeting was to raise financial support from involved governments, Heymann replied, "There's always a funding issue, although we're trying to have our partners fund their own activities in this." WHO is mainly coordinating others to do the work but, even so, WHO spending on SARS is about \$2 million from headquarters and about \$1.5 million from its regional offices. WHO has had to mobilize external funds as well as shift money within the organization. "The Director General has made available \$10 million for 2004-05, which will help us complete the international health regulations, and normalize these activities within WHO."

But the Kuala Lumpur meeting is mainly about science, said Dick Thompson, communications specialist for SARS at WHO. "For example, the people in Toronto don't know what the people in Taiwan or Hong Kong know, or vice versa. We had daily teleconferences, but on very specific questions. This provides a chance to sit down in hallways and talk. They just haven't had time to do that until now, because it's overtaxed the public health system.

"What will come out of this is a plan for where we go from here," said Thompson. "For example, there's a lot of money being poured into [vaccine research](#) - is that what public health needs? What we need is [a diagnostic that will work really early](#) in the disease, because come September when thousands get flu, some are going to show up at hospital with respiratory disease. So should they all be isolated as potential SARS cases? That could be expensive, so maybe what we need now is a rapid diagnostic test. That's the kind of question this meeting should resolve."

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