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Humanitarian aid may bring unique disease risks and concerns

Bethesda, Md. — Humanitarian and medical aid workers traveling to remote or resource-limited areas of the world need to take appropriate precautions and risk-mitigation efforts to prevent the transmission of disease while abroad. Guidance about pre-travel precautions and preventive measures are highlighted in the December 1, 2010 issue of *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, written by clinicians and researchers at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU) and their partners from the University of Texas Health Sciences Center, Naval Medical Research Center and others.

“There are risks incumbent in the type of work these aid workers are encountering when they travel in small or unsupported groups, where resources are not readily available to prevent the spread of diseases,” said Naomi Aronson, MD, Director, Infectious Diseases at the USU. “We need practical guidelines for global health efforts that these workers can follow. There are some significant, yet basic, protections that could help if the workers are educated properly, such as: proper use of masks, gloves, hand hygiene techniques and additional pre-travel immunizations. Among the health risks noted in the article are viral respiratory diseases, tuberculosis, and needlesticks, which could expose workers to diseases such as hepatitis, HIV, malaria, and hemorrhagic fever viruses.

Medical researchers and health care workers who travel to resource-limited settings to conduct patient care or research comprise an understudied travel population. The nature of their work, limited supplies, and potentially limited ability to use known beneficial infection control practices puts this group at unique risk for acquiring specific infections. Additionally, better awareness of the cultural environment and needs, enhanced use of preventive measures, including medication prophylaxis and vaccines, can help to mitigate the risk of potential occupationally acquired infectious diseases in such settings. Further study of the best ways to protect these individuals is imperative as responses to humanitarian and medical needs around the world increases.

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The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences is the nation's federal health sciences university. USU students are primarily active-duty uniformed officers in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Public Health Service who are being educated to deal with wartime casualties, emerging infectious diseases and other public health emergencies. Of the university's more than 4,500 physician alumni, the vast majority are supporting operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, offering their leadership and expertise. For more information, visit www.usuhs.mil.