USA OUTLOOK

Weekly newsletter | January 21 to 25

Foto: *CNN.com*

Superbugs and anti-vaxxers make WHO's list of 10 global health threats

From climate change to superbugs, the World Health Organization has laid out 10 big threats to our global health in 2019. And unless these threats get addressed, millions of lives will be in jeopardy. Here's a snapshot of 3 of the 10 urgent health issues, according to the United Nations' public health agency:

Not vaccinating when you can

One of the most controversial recent health topics in the US is now an international concern. "Vaccine hesitancy -- the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines -- threatens to reverse progress made in tackling vaccine-preventable diseases," WHO said. "Vaccination is one of the most cost-effective ways of avoiding disease -- it currently prevents 2-3 million deaths a year, and a further 1.5 million could be avoided if global coverage of vaccinations improved."

Drug-resistant superbugs

"Antimicrobial resistance -- the ability of bacteria, parasites, viruses and fungi to resist these medicines -- threatens to send us back to a time when we were unable to easily treat infections such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, and salmonellosis." About 1.6 million people die each year from tuberculosis, and many patients suffer because antibiotics don't work.

Air pollution and climate change

Polluted air kills 7 million people every year and about 90% of people now breathe it, WHO said. "Microscopic pollutants in the air can penetrate respiratory and circulatory systems, damaging the lungs, heart and brain, killing 7 million people prematurely every year from diseases such as cancer, stroke, heart and lung disease," the agency said.

The UN agency said between 2030 and 2050, "climate change is expected to cause 250,000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea and heat stress."

Foto: *USA Today*

Snow fallout: Airlines canceled more than 4,800 flights since Friday

Flight schedules appeared to be on the rebound Monday after a rough weekend for air travel. Nationwide, about 500 flights had been canceled Monday and another 3,000 delayed as of 2:15 p.m. ET, according to flight-tracking service FlightAware.com.

Monday's count comes after a spike in cancellations that has snarled flights since Friday from the Great Plains and Midwest into the Northeast in Canada since Friday. The culprit has been a potent winter storm – dubbed "Harper" by The Weather Channel – that's brought heavy snow, rain and strong winds to airports from the Great Plains and Midwest into the Northeast and New England. In total, airlines canceled more than 4,800 flights in the U.S. since the storm first began affecting flights Friday. More than 1,600 flights were canceled Sunday and another 2,165 on Saturday.

On Monday, flight schedules were improving in the wake of the storm, though they were far from normal.

The worst cancellation count so far for Monday were in Boston, where a combined 200 flights (combined arrivals and departures) had been canceled. More than 60 flights had been canceled at Washington Reagan National, Newark Liberty and New York LaGuardia. Travelers flying Monday should continue to keep an eye on the airports serving New York City, Philadelphia and Boston, where strong winds could lead to residual delays and cancellations.

Elsewhere, many smaller airports in interior New England and New York state were taking longer to get back to normal after up to 2 feet of snow fell in the region. In Albany, New York, many early departures had been canceled, scrapping about 20 percent of Monday's outbound schedule there, by FlightAware's count. In Burlington, Vermont, about a quarter of all departures and about 10 percent of all arrivals had been canceled. Some cancellations had even trickled into Tuesday. Most of those 17 flights were preemptively canceled by Sunday in anticipation of poor weather.

New intelligence strategy identifies emerging tech as major threat

Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats on Tuesday released the strategy meant to guide the U.S. intelligence community over the next four years, placing an emphasis on threats posed by new and emerging technologies.

The 2019 National Intelligence Strategy released by the Trump administration sets forth objectives for the intelligence community in a rapidly changing strategic environment where the United States faces both more traditional threats from nation states and extremist groups as well as burgeoning challenges posed by artificial intelligence, automation and other technologies.

"The strategic environment is changing rapidly and the United States faces an increasingly complex and uncertain world in which threats are becoming ever more diverse and interconnected," the document states.

Tuesday's release represents the fourth iteration of the nation's intelligence strategy. The objectives laid out in it do not differ greatly from those offered in the 2014 strategy document released during the Obama administration; namely, the intelligence community plans to focus on providing intelligence to counter cyber threats, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and the threat from foreign intelligence operations.

"Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, automation, and high performance computing are advancing computational capabilities that can be economically beneficial, however these advances also enable new and improved military and intelligence capabilities for our adversaries," the strategy states.

"Advances in nano- and bio-technologies have the potential to cure diseases and modify human performance, but without common ethical standards and shared interests to govern these developments, they have the potential to pose significant threats to U.S. interests and security," it states.

The document also recognizes growing strategic challenges in space and cyberspace, including digital threats that could damage critical infrastructure or impact public safety and economic stability.

Foto: *The Hill*

Insulin costs nearly doubled from 2012 to 2016, says report

Yearly spending on insulin for people with Type 1 diabetes nearly doubled from 2012 to 2016, according to a report released Tuesday.

The report from the nonprofit organization Health Care Cost Institute found patients spent an average $5,705 on insulin in 2016. Four years earlier, they spent $2,864.

Three years ago, the American Diabetes Association started an initiative called Stand Up for Affordable Insulin to pressure drugmakers to make insulin more affordable for patients.

Overall, annual spending on Type 1 diabetes jumped from $12,467 in 2012 to $18,494 in 2016. The report said the increase in insulin prices was a key factor in the increase in overall spending.

The report found average daily insulin use by people with Type 1 diabetes rose 3 percent during the four-year period.

"People are spending more for the same products," said Jean Fuglesten Biniek, a senior researcher at the Health Care Cost Institute and co-author of the report, in an interview with USA TODAY.

The Health Care Cost Institute is a nonprofit group that uses claims data from Medicare and four insurance companies – Aetna, Humana, Kaiser Permanente and UnitedHealthcare – to study health care costs. The institute is funded in part by the four insurance companies, the group says on its website.

Worldwide, insulin use is expected to rise 20 percent by 2030, and many patients won't have access, said a study released last year by Stanford University. According to the study, 79 million people worldwide will require insulin to treat the disease, but only 38 million will have access.

Foto: *Chicago Sun-Times*

Foto: ABC57.com

Boeing's first autonomous air taxi flight ends in fewer than 60 seconds

Boeing, the world's largest aerospace company, said it completed the first flight of its autonomous air taxi Tuesday at a small airport outside Washington, DC. No one was on board.

The flight lasted less than a minute, according to Boeing, and it didn't actually go anywhere. Instead, it hovered above the runway. Boeing declined to share how high above the ground it flew. The flying car prototype is 30 feet long and 28 feet wide. It's designed to fly up to 50 miles at a time.

Boeing and its competitors such as Airbus are betting that small, self-flying airplanes -- technically dubbed electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) -- will revolutionize transportation, especially in urban areas. Boeing believes the vehicles, more commonly referred to as air taxis or flying cars, will be a solution to traffic congestion.

Although Boeing and Airbus are among the largest players in the field, there are many Silicon Valley-backed eVTOL companies, including several owned byGoogle co-founder Larry Page.

"They have a production style product flying and have gone to the extent of publicizing [their efforts]," Sigari told CNN Business. "That shows that Boeing is taking this urban area mobility thing quite seriously. It's very exciting to see Boeing is coming out to show they really are in this."

"We have the ingredients for a different generation of aircraft that wasn't really feasible 10 years ago," Bartsch said. "We're going back to that golden age of innovation where people are trying new things." He estimates that between five and 10 other companies have done autonomous flights.

Aurora Flight Sciences, the Boeing subsidiary behind the flight, is a partner of Uber's flying car network, Uber Elevate. Uber plans to deploy air taxis commercially by 2023. It's unclear as of now if those companies will be able to match those timelines. Boeing is targeting the early 2020s.

But if self-driving car deployment is any indication, it could take much longer. The technology remains a work in progress. The vehicles need to handle a long list of challenging situations, from making a left turn at dusk on a road with pedestrians and cyclists to understanding which driver has the right of way at a four-way stop.