MIGRANTS AND EMERGING INFECTIOUS DISEASE:
AN EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE
VULNERABILITY OF LAO MIGRANT WORKERS TO
PANDEMIC INFLUENZA IN NAKHON PATHOM, THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Human migration plays an important factor in contributing to the spread of emerging infectious disease including the risk of transmitting other unusual illnesses among passengers who share the same mode of travel. Migration and movement of populations have broken national boundaries and concern about disease transmission has been raised over the past two decades. This concern falls particularly on groups of undocumented and illegal migrants who do not participate in the health screening process.

This research has objectives to explore behaviours and perceptions of Lao migrant workers as well as factors which influence them to be vulnerable to pandemic flu. It also aims to understand how they responded to the disease during a past crisis and how they will prepare for unforeseen outbreaks in the future. To this end, qualitative in-depth interviews and observation techniques were applied in the study.

Based on the findings, all informants were not aware of pandemic flu but had heard about it by the name of Flu 2009. However, few people perceived its severity and threat because of their level of understanding, and knowledge on prevention in particular. The inaccessibility of proper health information and messages and poor living conditions have contributed to the vulnerability of Lao migrant workers to not only pandemic flu but also other infectious diseases that might occur in the future. The results also showed that Lao migrant workers have been not been included in health campaigns and outreach programs, and have not been exposed to culturally appropriate health messages, and information, education and communication (IEC). Living naturally in the host society does not mean that Lao migrant workers access to and benefit from health systems is exactly the same as the host community. No health check points and screening systems are in place at the borders, causing the potential transmission of diseases to both the host and home communities.

KEY WORDS: PANDEMIC FLU / VULNERABILITY / PERCEPTION / PREVENTION / LAO MIGRANT WORKERS