

Draft bill for a new national public health law

March 23, 2022

In news– The Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and other Government departments have started the process of finalizing various provisions of the draft Bill for a new national public health law recently.

Key features of the draft law-

- **The proposed law will deal with updated, scientific and comprehensive provisions on surveillance, disease notification and public health emergencies** arising from epidemics, disasters and bioterrorism.
- The existing Epidemic Diseases Act lacks provisions for the management of a pandemic like Covid – the Government has been banking on the Epidemic Diseases Act and the Disaster Management Act of 2005.
- The National Public Health(NPH) Bill is expected to be introduced in the Monsoon Session of Parliament. Once the draft is ready, it will be placed in the public domain for consultation before being sent to the Union Cabinet.
- The proposed NPH Act **has been in the works since 2017 and, once enacted, will replace the 125-year-old Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897.**
- It **proposes a four-tier health administration architecture, with multi sectoral national, state, district and block-level** public health authorities who will have **well defined powers and functions** to deal with public health emergencies.
- As per the draft the **national public health authority is proposed to be headed by the Union Health Ministry,** and be chaired by health ministers of states.
- It further stated that **District Collectors will lead the next tier, and block units will be headed by Block**

Medical Officers or Medical Superintendents. **These authorities will have powers to take measures for the prevention of non-communicable diseases** and emerging infectious diseases.

- The proposed law also **provides for creation of public health cadres at national and state levels.**
- It **has defined various measures such as isolation, quarantine and lockdown,** which have been extensively invoked by the Centre and states for Covid management.
- **It defines a lockdown as “restriction with certain conditions** or complete prohibition of running any form of transport on roads or inland water”.
- **The definition of a lockdown covers “restrictions” on the movement or gathering of persons** in any place whether public or private.
- It **also includes “prohibiting or restricting” the working of factories,** plants, mining or construction or offices or Educational institutions or market places.
- **The draft lays down several situations in which “public health emergency” can be declared. They include bioterrorism;** appearance of a novel or previously controlled or eradicated infectious agent or **biological toxin;** a **natural disaster;** a **chemical attack** or accidental release of chemicals; a **nuclear attack** or accident.
- In 2017, the Union Health Ministry had released the draft of the Public Health (Prevention, Control and Management of Epidemics, Bio-terrorism and Disasters) Act, 2017. In September, 2020, the then Union Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan had announced in Parliament that the Government would formulate a national public health law.