

## **Pandemic Panic in the Media**<sup>1</sup>

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There's a lot of news coverage beginning to appear about the coming flu pandemic. So what? More media hype? Should we be concerned? The threat from a pandemic influenza sounds innocuous enough; after all, we experience influenza every year. In fact, some 36,000 Americans die annually from the flu and we hardly ever see any news coverage of that fact. Aside from the personal tragedies of those who die—mostly the very young, the very sick and the very old—the annual flu epidemic has limited periodic impact. What's coming is different, though: the seasonal influenza is as different to a pandemic influenza as a tidal surge is to a tsunami. And make no mistake: this impending pandemic influenza will affect the United States. Whether it hits us like a tsunami—creating sudden and high death rates—or whether it takes its toll in a manner that we can predict and somewhat control, is dependent upon how well prepared we are and how well we understand the facts.

The nation has faced a pandemic influenza disease outbreak—defined as a disease outbreak over a wide geographic area and affecting a high percentage of the population--three times in the past century: 1918, 1957, and 1968. These were events of major significance to the human race. Some estimates suggest that as many as 40 million lives were lost to the flu during the 1918 pandemic; including half a million Americans. One million lives were lost worldwide in 1957, and it is estimated that some 1-4 million died from the flu in 1968.

Those are large and chilling death rates, but are we certain that we're really headed for another pandemic? There does not seem to be a very predictable cycle: 39 years between '18 and '57; only 11 years between '57 and '68; and none in the last 37 years. So why is it important now, in the midst of heightened concerns about terrorist threats, to consider this seemingly random event as impending?

Current concerns about a possible pandemic episode are focused on a virus identified as H5N1. This virus has been circulating in bird populations for several years, causing the death of thousands of birds and, in an effort to control the spread of disease, leading to the culling of many millions of domestic fowl. Since 2003 the virus infections in Asia have resulted in the death or culling of more than 100 million birds. Despite this considerable impact, the real concern remains human-to-human transmission of this

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lethal virus. While H5N1 can presently be spread from birds to humans, it is the eventual mutation of the virus, to where it can pass from one human to another, that will be the basis of the flu pandemic.

Most human H5N1 infections so far are thought to have occurred through some form of contact with live or dead infected poultry, but isolated instances of probable person-to-person transmission were documented in Hong Kong as early 1997. Last year, in Thailand, more human-to-human transmission was suspected, and it cannot be excluded in some of the cases reported in Cambodia and Viet Nam. In the past few days, reports of human transmission and deaths have also surfaced in Indonesia.

There is also evidence that the virus is evolving through successive mutations in man—thus, setting the stage for human-to-human transmission and a potential pandemic. The changes in epidemiological patterns are consistent with the possibility that recently emerging H5N1 viruses may be more infectious for humans. While the implications of these epidemiological and virological findings are not fully clear, they demonstrate that the virus is continuing to evolve and poses a continuing and potentially growing pandemic threat.

Lastly, there is concern about the efficacy of antiviral treatments and prophylaxis against H5N1. Reports in the media have indicated that the Chinese may have misused a human antiviral drug normally used to combat the flu in humans. Amantadine was apparently administered to fowl, in an effort to curb the spread of the virus in those economically valuable populations. Amantadine is one of only two such drugs available for human use against the flu, and because of its widespread misuse, H5N1 may have become resistant to the drug. At present, this leaves us with only one antiviral drug--Oseltamivir (Tamiflu)--for humans. (Development of a vaccine is on-going, but if a pandemic with H5N1 were to start with this next flu season in November, we will not have anything ready in time. The “normal” flu vaccine will be available for the season’s “routine” flu, but that is a separate issue from H5N1.)

The head of the US Department of Health and Human Services, Secretary Mike Leavitt, noted at a recent World Health Organization conference that he believes “...the world is closer to a potential influenza pandemic now than at any time in decades.” Secretary Leavitt’s remarks are echoed by any number of infectious disease experts and are now routinely found in all forms of the media. Consequently, the public is becoming increasingly aware of a “problem” and is anticipating a significant “solution” from its leaders and the agencies of government.

It is clear that a pandemic influenza can rightly be called a challenge “like nothing we have seen this century.” No doubt, it will attract more than its share of doom-mongers, sensationalists, and the usual bevy of “talking heads,” and we will see their opinions in all forms of the media and on the Internet. The first mention of a possible outbreak of a “killer influenza” in the United States will engender concern and even fear in a population already sensitized to their own vulnerability and that of their families. And that process has already begun...

Many common public journals, newspapers, and mainstream magazines have run reasonably accurate stories that review the basic history of avian influenza. Others, however—including some of the most respected news outlets in the country—have resorted to using catch phrases to jolt the reader and have contributed to a growing sense of “pandemic panic.” In recent articles on H5N1 some newspapers have used phrases so exaggerated and dramatic just in the titles of the articles, let alone in the text, as to feed this “pandemic panic.” For example:

- “Nightmare Scenario Risk of Lightning Quick Pandemic Requires Urgent Action”  
(Allows the reader to believe that the pandemic could lead many countries into highly destructive quarantines that would disrupt trade, travel & production. In addition, many venues of human contact would cease. “Imagine the chaos.”)
- “Avian Strain Has Potential to Mutate into Killer of People”  
(Communicates 2-7 millions deaths to the readers as “best case scenario.” In addition the article vividly describes scientists working with the virus like a scene from the movie “Outbreak,” with scientists in rubber protective clothing in a vacuum sealed room encased in two other vacuum sealed rooms)
- “Close to Pandemic, Experts Warns Estimate of 7.5 M Global Deaths is Optimistic”  
(States that many warnings from Nature magazine about the virus has “fallen on deaf ears” in addition to the world’s inability to manufacture enough vaccines for a pandemic the size of H5N1)
- “Flu Plan Laid Out in Chilling Detail” (“Chilling” as reference to a mortuary)  
(Canadian government’s response plan according to this article discusses in detail the list of every embalming and casket supplier in Canada, mass graves, and temporary morgues)
- “Avian Flu: ‘We’re Screwed’ If It Hits Soon”  
(A well known scientist makes an unfortunate statement at a meeting in Washington. In addition, the picture accompanying the article shows a woman lying down in critical condition with a respiratory illness similar to avian influenza)
- “A Killer Flu?”  
(Initial paragraphs communicate that with the new strain of the flu people will have no immunity to protect themselves. H5N1 is characteristic of having a mortality rate over 50% ...”a strain significantly more lethal than the 1968 pandemic flu strain”)

Very few of these “panic” media outlets are referring their readers to credible resources for Frequently Asked Questions; such as the Centers for Disease Control, the World

Health Organization, and the US Department of Health and Human Services. All of these organizations have websites that provide history, background information, plans of preparedness, vaccine information, best estimates of morbidity and mortality, estimates of economic impact, and up-to-date policy information. Listed below are direct links to avian influenza and disaster emergency websites that provide accurate, reliable and reasoned information for the public.\*

Rather than mitigating the situation and helping to stem “pandemic panic,” much of the current media coverage is fueling the potential for panic and failing to provide a rational perspective on the true threat of H5N1 for the United States. This is not to say that we should be complacent; the virus is real, and the US population will eventually be affected by H5N1. And while there is a considerable amount of preparedness underway, it is true that much more initiative needs to be taken at the federal, state and local levels to prepare for the inevitable.

Creating fear in the public place is uncalled for, though. According to a poll that the British Medical Association published in 1999, 79% of the public did not believe journalists. In the U.S., The Pew Research Center reports that a growing number of reporters, editors and news executives state news reports are full of factual errors and sloppy reporting. To reduce the unnecessary level of “pandemic panic” and prevent its further spread, leaders from all areas of society—and especially the media--need to provide useful and reliable public information and stop creating sensational news clips that run the risk of needlessly disrupting society. By helping the public prepare for and respond to the coming pandemic, through calm, reasoned and accurate reporting, the media could actually see one of its finest hours.

#### **\*Where to Go**

**CDC:** <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/index.htm>

This webpage provides background information about avian influenza, including recent outbreaks, the viruses, and the risk to human health

**WHO:** [http://www.who.int/topics/avian\\_influenza/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/topics/avian_influenza/en/index.html)

This page provides links to description of activities, reports, news, and events, as well as contacts and cooperating partners in the various WHO programs.

[http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/influenza/WHO\\_CDS\\_CSR\\_GIP\\_2005\\_5.pdf](http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/influenza/WHO_CDS_CSR_GIP_2005_5.pdf)

The role of WHO and recommendations for national measures before and during pandemics

**HHS:** <http://hhs.gov/emergency/index.shtml>

This page is the disasters and emergencies website for HHS relating information on such topics as: Biological, chemical and radiological weapons, bioterrorism, emergency medical services, environmental disasters, homeland security, natural disasters, traumatic events, and safety of the water supply.