

THE SCOTSMAN
Thu 26 May 2005



A health worker injects a chicken with the bird-flu vaccine as China takes emergency steps after migrating geese were found to have died from the virus in Qinghai province.

Picture: Getty Images

Bird flu: 20% of globe may be hit

JAMES REYNOLDS

A FIFTH of the world's population could be struck down with a new influenza pandemic, triggering global economic meltdown and a complete freeze on international travel, experts have warned.

Scientists say world leaders should start planning now for an outbreak that could lead to several million deaths, widespread panic and the collapse of international trade.

Only a global response, rather than countries focusing wholly on their own protection, would stand any chance of averting the catastrophe, it is claimed.

Fears of a pandemic have arisen after outbreaks of the H5N1 bird-flu strain in south-east Asia, which has caused a total of more than 50 confirmed human deaths. The fatality rate of humans infected by the virus is as high as 60 per cent.

At present, there is no evidence that the strain can be transmitted from one person to another, but it may only be a matter of time before the virus mutates into a form that can easily pass between people. Should that happen, it would spread rapidly around the world, with devastating consequences.

Scientists writing in the journal *Nature* said the world today was far more vulnerable to the effects of a pandemic than it was in 1918, when a deadly strain of influenza killed between 20 million and 40 million people.

An optimistic estimate suggests that the next flu pandemic could cause 20 per cent of the



world's population to become ill. Within a few months, almost 30 million people would need to be hospitalised, and a quarter of them would die.

But the effects on today's highly interconnected world economy would be just as serious, it is claimed.

Professor Michael Osterholm, of the Centre for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, said: "The arrival of pandemic flu will trigger a reaction that will change the world overnight.

"There will be an immediate response from leaders to stop the virus entering their countries by greatly reducing and even ending foreign travel and trade - as was seen in parts of Asia in response to the severe acute respiratory syndrome [SARS] epidemic.

"These efforts are doomed to fail given the infectiousness of the virus and the volume of illegal crossings that occur at most borders. Global, national and regional economies will come to an abrupt halt."

International co-operation was vital to minimise the impact of a pandemic, Prof Osterholm said. In particular, a global effort was needed to develop a new type of vaccine that could be manufactured quickly and that targeted multiple strains. But he added: "Unfortunately, most industrial countries are looking at the vaccine issue through myopic lenses."

He warned that time was running out to prepare for the next flu pandemic and said there was a "critical need" for medical and non-medical planning, involving both the public and private sectors, at a level beyond anything considered so far.

Meanwhile, four Dutch experts, led by Dr Albert Osterhaus, from the Erasmus Medical Centre in Rotterdam, made an urgent call for a global taskforce to control a future pandemic.

It would consist of leading specialists in the fields of human and animal medicine, virology, epidemiology, pathology, ecology and agriculture. It would also include experts in translating science into policy. Management teams would be available to target specific flu outbreaks occurring anywhere in the world.

"Given the large geographical area in which the H5N1 virus has become endemic, and the greater potential for rapid virus spread, an efficient, effective, outbreak management team strategy, with centralised guidance, is urgently needed," the Dutch team said. Early detection and a rapid response to bird flu at a global level would greatly reduce the cost of dealing with a full-blown outbreak, they added.

Hugh Pennington, the internationally renowned emeritus professor of bacteriology at Aberdeen University, said: "If the mutation takes place or some kind of gene exchange happens to allow it to spread from person to person, then we get into the severity that this article [in Nature] discusses.

"Against this virus, we don't have any immunity, and it is the fact that it is brand new to our immune systems that gets people worried.

"How serious it is will depend on the kind of virus that develops, but we have no way of

knowing, so it is really quite difficult to make any definitive predictions or put any odds on it happening at all. They are right to be concerned, and to call for well-formulated contingency plans, but it is very much something that we will have to wait and see about."

Web links

- [Dept of Health - pandemic flu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en)
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en>
- [WHO - Bird Flu fact sheet](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)
http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/

Related topic

- [Bird flu](http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=161)
<http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=161>

This article: <http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=161&id=573902005>

Last updated: 26-May-05 00:14 GMT

Ads by Google

[Unexplained Symptoms?](#)

Why guess? Our business is that of telling you what's really going on.

www.Diagnose-Me.com

[Healthcare Links](#)

Links and resources for those seeking online information.

www.medmark.org

[Medical Information](#)

Medical Information info from several different companies.

BusinessChambers.com
