


THE SCOTSMAN
Fri 23 Jan 2004

Bird flu a 'threat to humanity'

JOHN INNES

CHICKEN influenza poses a frightening potential threat to humanity, a leading medical journal has warned.

Five people in Vietnam are now known to have died in the latest outbreak of dangerous influenza carried by birds.

The medical journal Lancet has warned that standard vaccines would be useless against the virus if it started spreading through human communities.

At present, the avian influenza strain, known as H5N1, is not thought capable of passing from person to person, but experts fear it might acquire the ability if its DNA mingles with that of a human flu virus. Such "reassortment" is a well-known feature of viruses.

If this were to happen, the scene could be set for a major worldwide disaster like the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918, which killed up to 40 million people.

The Lancet said in an editorial: "The fear is that a strain such as H5N1 might reassort with a human influenza virus to become contagious among people.

"In view of the high mortality of human influenza associated with this strain, the prospect of a worldwide pandemic is massively frightening."

Wild birds were the main source of avian influenza, but the virus was provided with a breeding ground in the live poultry markets of Asia.

In 1997, 18 people in Hong Kong were admitted to hospital with H5N1 infection. Six died. The outbreak was the first documented example of direct transmission to humans and resulted in 1.4 million chickens and other poultry - the entire stock in Hong Kong - being destroyed. Another outbreak in the former colony in 1999 saw 1.25 million birds culled.

Last year, two Hong Kong residents developed H5N1 flu after returning from China. One died. In the same year, a related strain, H7N7, broke out in the Netherlands poultry industry and killed a vet.

Experts from the World Health Organisation, the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation have gone to Vietnam following the outbreak.



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- [WHO - Bird Flu fact sheet](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)
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Last updated: 23-Jan-04 09:48 GMT

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