



THE SCOTSMAN

Thu 12 Jan 2006

Bird flu 'spiralling out of control'

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THE deadly bird flu virus may be getting more effective at infecting humans, the World Health Organisation believes, as experts warned that the disease was spiralling out of control among poultry in Turkey and posed "a serious threat" to neighbouring countries.

With 15 cases confirmed in humans in Turkey in the past week - compared with 140 in five years in the Far East - concern is growing that the disease may be evolving quickly.

The speed of the outbreak's spread prompted governments across Europe yesterday to guard against the disease.

Three neighbouring countries - Greece, Georgia and Syria - have increased border inspections. Vehicles entering Greece from Turkey are being sprayed with disinfectant, while in Georgia, villagers in a border region are slaughtering all chickens, geese and ducks.

France announced a new plan to deal with the disease and said it was spending more than £480 million on anti-virals, vaccines and face-masks. Germany plans to order that domestic birds be kept indoors.

While the European Union has issued a warning urging countries to remain vigilant for the arrival of infected migratory birds, the efforts to stop the disease from spreading have failed to impress United Nations experts.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) said the "highly pathogenic virus could become endemic in Turkey and poses a serious risk to neighbouring countries".

Juan Lubroth, a senior FAO animal health officer, said: "The virus may be spreading despite the control measures already taken. Far more human and animal exposure to the virus will occur if strict containment does not isolate all known and unknown locations where the bird flu virus is currently present."

Every human case was a chance for the virus to mix with human flu into a disease that is highly infectious as well as deadly, starting a pandemic.

WHO said that while it was not clear why so many people had been infected in Turkey so quickly, the virus might be starting to change. Guenaël Rodier, who is leading WHO's mission to Turkey, said: "It is an open question if we are seeing a more efficient transmission from animals to humans."

Experts contacted by The Scotsman were not convinced this was happening, but added if the number of cases rose quickly to more than 100, it would be a sign of a significant alteration in the virus. They also expressed doubts that this would be a step closer to a pandemic form.



Also yesterday, a senior UN official urged countries attending an international conference on bird flu in China next week to pledge the £1.2 billion needed to help fight the disease worldwide by putting influenza programmes in place and controlling outbreaks in birds.

He added much more would be needed in the event of a pandemic.

Dr Marc Danzon, WHO's regional director for Europe, said: "The worst situation is a panic situation. There is no reason to panic."

Some 70 people in Turkey have been undergoing tests, but most of results so far have reportedly proved negative.

The UK is spending about £200 million on the anti-viral drug Tamiflu and has ordered two million doses of vaccine against the existing strain of the disease. It has also pre-ordered 120 million doses of a planned vaccine against the potential pandemic strain, to be produced if and when it emerges.

The Conservatives said the UK contingency plan is a good one.

In Scotland, Andy Kerr, the health minister, told Executive colleagues that people "should not be unduly alarmed" by the outbreak in Turkey.

"He made the point that this wasn't a cause for any real concern here, in the sense that we understood exactly what was happening," said a spokesman.

"He also made the point that Scotland has been working with health departments across the UK and is fully prepared for a flu pandemic."

Shona Robison, the SNP health spokeswoman, yesterday broadly agreed, but highlighted fears that the NHS would struggle to cope if there was an outbreak this winter.

However Professor Hugh Pennington, one of Britain's leading microbiologists, yesterday reiterated his call for the government to buy stocks of the existing vaccine.

He said: "Even if the vaccine is imperfect, I think the consensus view is it would save lives. It may not protect you from having the flu, but would perhaps give you a much better chance of getting through.

"Tamiflu hasn't worked wonders yet as far as I can tell. We know of at least one fatality."

Meanwhile in Turkey, doctors were closely watching two brothers, aged four and five, who have tested positive for the H5N1 virus but so far have shown no symptoms of the disease.

And in the eastern province of Van, Sumeyye Mamuk, eight, who fell ill after hugging a sick chicken she felt sorry for, has recovered enough to wander the hospital corridor.

"I was sad about the chickens and held one in my lap. I miss my family," she said.

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Last updated: 12-Jan-06 01:28 GMT

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