



THE SCOTSMAN

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Flu pandemic 'may overwhelm NHS'

IAN JOHNSTON AND HARRIET AGNEW

A BIRD flu pandemic would be "somewhere between major and catastrophic" for Britain, with the NHS unable to cope with the worst case scenario, a House of Lords committee heard yesterday.

A World Health Organisation (WHO) official predicted the pandemic could be as serious as the Spanish flu of 1918, which killed 50 million people worldwide.

And even though the UK is one of the best-prepared countries in the world, the NHS would face being overwhelmed, as doctors and nurses became too sick to work, while others stayed away for fear of becoming infected.

While the Lords were being given the gloomy prognosis, some butchers reported a fall in chicken sales because of worries about bird flu, while a chef at the Michelin-starred Roussillon restaurant in London took everything relating to birds off the menu.

Experts called to the Lords' select committee on science and technology painted a bleak picture of Britain in the grip of the virus, with routine operations cancelled and patients being taught "self-management" of their conditions. One said up to half of Britain's nurses might be off work, with managers possibly having to call up retired nurses and retrain others to deal with intensive care patients.

Dr Richard Jarvis, a consultant and senior member of the British Medical Association, said: "The effect on society as a whole will lie somewhere between major and catastrophic." However he added that the pandemic planning in Britain was "as good as anywhere in the world".

Professor David Menon, of the Intensive Care Society, warned that, while a quarter of the population were likely to be affected, up to half of nurses could stay away from work. "A lot of them will actually be scared either for themselves or their families ... we should anticipate that we could lose 25 to 50 per cent of our nursing staff," he said.

Prof Menon also warned that many routine services could be cancelled. "I think we need to realise that we can't prepare for the catastrophic scenario," he said.

Dr Klaus Stohr, of the WHO, said that a pandemic could be as bad as the Spanish flu of 1918. Even a mild pandemic would affect 25 to 30 per cent of the world's population, killing up to seven million and hospitalising up to 28 million.

"The number of people who would be sick would be in the billions," he added.



Professor Nigel Mathers, of the Royal College of General Practitioners, said there would be up to an additional 10,000 consultations per week per 100,000 population. "We would not be able to cope with a demand like that," he said. "We would need some alternative provision."

A triage system would have to be put in place to allocate treatment, he said, adding: "We would have to teach people about self-management and about when to see a doctor."

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/

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