


 THE SCOTSMAN

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New doubt on efficacy of anti-bird flu drug

ALISON HARDIE SENIOR NEWS WRITER

Key points

- 13-year-old Vietnamese girl dies of bird flu despite treatment of Tamiflu
- 4 of 8 Vietnamese bird flu patients have died despite Tamiflu treatment
- Leading scientist repeats warning that drug is ineffective

Key quote

"I am quite clear that a vaccine needs to be ready in the case of an emergency. It is not enough for the government to put all its eggs in the Tamiflu basket - that is an unwise strategy" - *Professor Hugh Pennington, President of the Society for General Microbiology*

Story in full THE efficacy of the drug stockpiled by the government in case of a flu pandemic was under question again yesterday after a teenager died despite being treated with it.

The 13-year-old girl from Vietnam died after succumbing to a form of the H5N1 bird flu virus, although doctors had given her doses of Tamiflu early in her illness.

Her case prompted a leading scientist to repeat his warning yesterday that Tamiflu, the anti-viral drug stockpiled by the Department of Health, may not be effective if the virus mutates by the time it reaches Britain.



Professor Hugh Pennington, the President of the Society for General Microbiology, said: "Tamiflu should not be regarded as the bulwark defence to the virus because, as the case in Vietnam demonstrates, it is not perfect."

The government has ordered 15 million doses of Tamiflu, but just two to three million doses of the vaccine specifically designed to work against H5N1 which has already killed more than 60 people in the Far East.

Prof Pennington said: "The government has played cool on the idea of a vaccine and, while there is a degree of logic in that, my colleagues and I believe it is far better to have a vaccine even if it later turned out to be not quite perfect.

"I am quite clear that a vaccine needs to be ready in the case of an emergency. It is not enough for the government to put all its eggs in the Tamiflu basket - that is an unwise strategy."

Prof Pennington said he could not say conclusively that the case of the 13-year-old girl was further evidence that the H5N1 virus, caught by humans after contact with birds contaminated with the disease, had mutated to become resistant to Tamiflu.

However, four of eight patients treated in Vietnam for bird flu infections have died despite

the use of Tamiflu, according to Dr Menno de Jong of the Oxford University Clinical Research Unit at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in Ho Chi Minh city.

Other experts also stressed the Vietnam case showed that individuals should not be stockpiling Tamiflu for their own possible use in case of a pandemic.

Dr Anne Moscona, an expert in paediatric viral diseases at Weill Medical College of Cornell University, New York, said: "The fact that influenza can develop resistance to Tamiflu is not a surprise.

"The neuraminidase inhibitors [such as Tamiflu and Relenza] are really important, really effective drugs and we need not to lose sight of that. We just need to use them properly."

Meanwhile, it was disclosed yesterday that China had begun human trials of its homegrown bird flu vaccine with six volunteers receiving shots.

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/)
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