

THE SCOTSMAN
Fri 21 Oct 2005



The avian flu virus which has swept across the globe originated on a farm in Aberdeen in 1959, say academics.

Picture: Daniel Mihailescu/AFP/Getty Images

Scientists discover deadly bird flu began in Scotland

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Key points

- The first record of the H5N1 virus has been traced to an Aberdeen farm
- The avian flu has been tracked back to a Scottish chicken in 1959
- The virus has become deadlier over the past 46 years

Story in full

THE strain of avian flu which has so far swept from South Korea to Russia made its world debut in 1959 inside a Scottish chicken, it has emerged.

Scientists tracing the history of the H5N1 virus have traced its first recorded episode to an Aberdeen farm. The dead bird was taken to Surrey for medical examination, after infecting two flocks of chickens.

But while British medical authorities are preparing to cope with a pandemic of a new H5N1 outbreak from South-east Asia, the case notes of the original Scottish case have not been consulted, on the grounds that the virus has grown far heartier and deadlier over the past 46 years.

The reams of research papers tracing the history of H5N1, which resurfaced in South Korea two years ago, show academics are unanimous in identifying the virus as being effectively made in Scotland.

A scientist identified only as Dr JE Wilson, of the Veterinary Laboratory in Lasswade, outside Edinburgh, is recorded as having worked on the case - sending the chicken to Addlestone, where the strain was medically isolated so it could be used in experiments. The Scottish H5N1



has been used in experiments, named "chicken/Scotland/1959".

It was the first of 21 avian flu outbreaks that have affected the world - including English turkeys in 1963, 1979 and 1991. But none showed the powers of contagion seen by the eight Asian countries to have confirmed H5N1, which has killed 69 people and 100 million birds.

Tom Pennycott, an avian veterinary specialist at the Scottish Agricultural College at Auchincruive, Ayrshire, said the virus may have the same title, but other characteristics will have changed over 46 years.

"The H5N1 that was found back in 1959 would have been quite different to the one that's around now," he said. "Similarly, there was an H5N1 down in Norfolk in December 1991 and it will be different to the H5N1 that's about just now."

He added that the only additional information he has been able to find about the H5N1 in Scotland was that two flocks of chickens were infected. The total number of birds affected, however, was not reported.

No medical agency in Scotland or England was able to give many details - except to say that the disease has become heartier and deadlier since it was found in Scotland. There is also no sign of Dr Wilson. The Moredun Research Institute at Penicuik said that it had no record of him and that he was likely to have passed away.

Flu strains are named after the various H and N protein codes recognised by the immune system. No H5 flu had ever spread to humans before 1997, when Hong Kong reported six casualties.

The 1959 Scottish H5N1 was - like all its successors - incapable of moving from species to species. But this changed last year, when the South Korean version showed itself capable of infecting pigs, rodents and humans.

Scientists have been most alarmed at the fast rate of H5N1's mutation. For the first time, the virus can survive in chicken faeces and in dead meat, without requiring the flow of fresh blood. This has made it stealthier, claiming victims who had no obvious connection with the agricultural industry.

But its low human death toll suggests that the disease has yet to pass from human to human.

Meanwhile, Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, met British farmers yesterday and said he agreed with the National Farmers Union that chicken remained safe to eat.

Web links

- Dept of Health - pandemic flu
<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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Last updated: 21-Oct-05 15:26 GMT

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