

Prepare for H5N1



By Leslie Morgan

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Last week three of our staff had time off with flu and it made me start to reflect on how quickly and easily flu can spread. In general terms, flu is usually a debilitating rather than a life-threatening disease. But in the case of Avian Influenza H5N1, popularly known as bird flu, the danger of a pandemic – where a disease is prevalent over a whole country or the world – means the risk to human life is real. The most recent WHO figures show that there have been 225 human cases of infection and 128 deaths across 10 countries.

The main concern is that each new human case increases the chance of the feared ‘human’ mutation that could spark a pandemic – a rare but recurrent event.

There were three influenza pandemics in the twentieth century: “Spanish Influenza” in 1918, “Asian Influenza” in 1957 and “Hong Kong Influenza” in 1968. An estimated 40-50 million people worldwide died from the disease in 1918. That exceptional pandemic is considered one of the deadliest disease events in human history. Subsequent pandemics were much milder, with an estimated two million deaths in 1957 and one million in 1968.

Health experts have been monitoring the H5N1 strain for almost eight years - this virus has caused the largest and most severe outbreaks in poultry on record. Though it is new to humans and does not currently spread easily from one person to another, the stark reality is that another influenza pandemic may be imminent.

The WHO Alert Phase for H5N1 is currently at three. There are six distinct phases which have been defined to help governments, industry and WHO prepare and plan for a potential outbreak. The strategy is three-fold: i) preparedness; ii) rapid response; and iii) containment. The trouble is, these activities are costly. Wealthy countries are somewhat prepared, poorer countries are not. In fact, only a fifth of the world’s countries have some form of a response plan, but these vary greatly in comprehensiveness and stage of completion.

WHO warns that supplies of antiviral drugs will be inadequate in all countries at the start of a pandemic and for many months after. As prevention by vaccination is considered the first line of defence, inadequate supplies of vaccines are of particular concern. If present trends continue, many developing countries will have no access to vaccines throughout the duration of a pandemic.

If the pandemic cannot be stopped at source, WHO predicts it will spread worldwide in three months because classic influenza is airborne and spreads very easily. Every single country will be affected with widespread illness and death. The economic and social implications will be huge.

The more positive news is that studies show that if certain public health measures are put into place and antiviral vaccines and drugs like Tamiflu and Relenza are rushed to the region in which a pandemic strain first emerges, it may be possible to contain it before it spreads worldwide.

WHO will alert the world if/when the pandemic threat increases. In the meantime, preparation is crucial. If you haven’t started planning, then start to do it now. Remember that supplies of Tamiflu and Relenza are now more plentiful which means prices are more reasonable than nine months ago when supplies were short. Durbin PLC is at your service! ■

Durbin PLC is a British company based in South Harrow, London. Established in 1963, the company specialises in supplying quality assured pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and consumable supplies to healthcare professionals and aid agencies in over 140 countries. As well as reacting rapidly to emergency situations, Durbin PLC responds to healthcare supply needs from local project level to national scale programmes. Web address: www.durbin.co.uk Email: L.morgan@durbin.co.uk