

The Bird Flu: Fish or Fowl

In the back pew of a small town church, several voices can be heard speaking in low but intense tones. "I have a friend who works in a morgue," one man says. "He got a call from the government asking how many bodies he can cremate in a single day. When he told them the number, they told him to double it." Heads shake and groans of dread are muttered before yet another man speaks up.

"I hear that once the disease is contracted, blood gushes almost immediately from your eyes, nose, and ears."

"Yes!" interrupts someone else. "I heard that too, and not only that, but you are dead within two hours. And it is one hundred percent fatal!" With this final remark, all voices fall in fearful silence of the impending threat: the bird flu. But when so few facts are known, such fish stories are believed to be reality, and that is a recipe for pandemonium. It is for this reason that it has become all the more important to know about the bird flu: what the chances are of it becoming a pandemic, what effect it will have on the economy, and what is being done about it.

When investigating the bird flu, also known as the avian flu, two views seem most pronounced: the view that the bird flu may become a pandemic, and the view that the bird flu is the pandemic. Pandemics occur about every fifty years, the last of which happened 37 years ago in 1968. With the next pandemic fast approaching, microbiologists have kept a watchful eye for any "ripples in the water" and the bird flu is what snagged their line. Although, at present, the concern is minimal, limited only to members of the population with close contact to infected animals, many fear that the virus will mutate into a form that will spread easily from human to human. Should such a mutation occur the Department of Health and Human Services estimates the U.S. population to suffer a 15 to 35 percent infection rate ("Influenza").

Furthermore, the avian flu is thought to possess the greatest danger to the strong and healthy, as did the Spanish flu in 1918. The Spanish flu was also an avian flu. Ironically, it caused such a violent reaction in those with healthy immune systems that the immune system did more harm than good while those with weak immune systems, and therefore mild reactions, had a greater chance of survival against the virus.

Given that evidence, it is no wonder that some within the medical field have decided to "abandon ship" to any reservations they may have on the bird flu, but not all. Mark Siegel, a medical doctor and professor at the University of New York, argues that even though a pandemic of some sort is absolute, making the bird flu out to be the perpetrator may be premature (Langdon 19). Another among the same view as Siegel is the European Union's Center for Disease Control. It claims that the current majority of the European population has no risk of being infected (Hundley). This is because the majority of the population has no direct contact with infected birds, and as long as the flu cannot be transmitted by any other means the population is safe. Perhaps some day the bird flu may pose a large threat to humans, but for now it remains to be a small fish.

However, just because something is small, doesn't stop it from having huge ramifications. While the medical implications of the virus have yet to be determined, its economic effects can already be felt. In preparation for the possible pandemic, most major global powers have begun to stockpile antigens and vaccines and created a world wide shortage of antiviral medications. As a result, money is pouring into pharmaceuticals. Even the U.S has granted \$2,009,000 to Vical Incorporated for the development of a vaccine to fight the deadly flu. In the race to supply more vaccine, Switzerland's Roche Holding has asked to produce a generic adaptation of the drug Tamiflu. Meeting the demand for vaccine, however, may be harder than previously thought. Andrew Pekoz, a Washington State University associate professor of microbiology, points out that the bird flu will require eight times more vaccine than is normally needed to be effective (Langdon19). This leaves the market wide open, at present, to entrepreneurs, who, according to Tom Hundley, sell Tamiflu off eBay for six times its standard price. But while some are riding this wave, others are not. Ah Tongh, an Indonesian farmer, recalls the loss of 150,000 chickens in a single month as a result of the bird flu, leaving him with less than a third of what he

had originally owned (Elegant). Should the bird flu cross the sea to America, it can be expected that poultry sales will drop much as beef sales did during the "Mad Cow" scare. But poultry sales will be only one contributing factor in a nationwide economic fall out. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a conservative estimate of the avian flu's effect on the economy would be between \$71.3 and \$166.5 billion ("Influenza"). Then again, even if the bird flu never becomes a pandemic, paranoia about the flu may still threaten to swallow the economy whole, making the economy the flu's greatest casualty.

It would seem that whatever outcome the bird flu may have, there is still time to prepare for the worst, and the preferred tactic is to uncover the threat early on. During an address at the National Institutes of Health, President Bush stressed the importance of catching the disease before it has a chance to take root. But will the bird flu be the one that got away? According to Julie Hall, who works for the World Health Organization (WHO) in Beijing, if an outbreak is detected within the first three weeks before it has infected more than 20 people, the viral strain has less than a 10 percent chance of taking root in that region. That opens the possibility of eradicating the disease. But, even with the finest healthcare available, says Hall, early detection may prove difficult (Liu). Health officials will be relying heavily on the correct diagnosis of a virus that has, up until the end of the 20th century, not been seen in humans. Furthermore, there is great anxiety over treatment of the virus. Antiviral vaccine for the flu has been stockpiled, but until scientists know for sure what the virus looks like, it is impossible to make a true vaccine. Moreover, once scientists have a clear picture of the virus, making the vaccine could take anywhere from six to eight months to complete, and even then the vaccine will be untested. With so many possible snags, health officials have turned to what may prove to be their strongest asset: communication. Across the nation, health and emergency officials have met to formulate a plan that would address the issues of public awareness, the setting up of a screening clinic, and the transportation of people in quarantine. However, in the midst of all that is being done, there is a point in which all that can be truly done is to wait.

It is said that "good things come to those who wait," yet in this case the "good thing" would be that nothing would come at all. Many still cling to the hope that this will be the case, but should this hope die, there is still comfort in knowing what the real threat is, how it will affect the economy, and what has been done in preparation for such an attack. With this knowledge, the dark shadow cast by the ominous avian flu begins to fade, and new light shines on an uncertain world which with baited breath has been wondering if this fish story will bite.

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