

The following article was written by Janet Osborne [BAppSci(IT), Dip. IS&T Management, NZLEC], published in the Standby December 2005 edition newsletter.

Bird Flu: Should We Be Worried?

Hardly a day goes by without some mention in the media regarding the threat of the “Bird” influenza strain, H5N1. But, what of it and why are world health officials so concerned? After all, we are only talking about a virus that has been detected in some water fowl, poultry and a handful of other avian species across various parts of Asia – or are we?

To date there have only been 130 notified cases of H5N1 in humans throughout Asia. In nearly all of those cases, the cause of the virus has been traced back to direct contact with infected birds or their faeces. So far, the virus has not spread from person to person. However, scientists believe that it is only a matter of time before this will happen. While the number of cases may seem paltry (excuse the pun) compared to the size of the Asian population, it is the rapid onset and severity of the viral infection and the high 1:2 mortality rate that has been the cause for concern.

To understand the severity of the situation and the impact it might have on businesses and organisations in New Zealand, we need to take a look back at other influenza pandemics in World history.

Avian influenza or Bird Flu’ as it is more commonly known, is not a newly discovered virus. It was first identified in Italy more than 100 years ago and 15 sub types have since been identified. The link between avian and human influenza was first discovered in 1957, however this was not the first time that the virus had mutated and jumped species. The first major influenza pandemic to sweep the World was the Spanish Flu’ between 1918 and 1919. This was followed by the Asian Flu’ (1957-1958) and the Hong Kong Flu’ between 1968 and 1969. Each of these pandemics were a different strain of Bird Flu’.

Cited as the most devastating epidemic in recorded World History, the Spanish Flu’ outstripped the Bubonic Plague in terms of mortality, killing an estimated 40-50 million people worldwide. What was unusual was that the virus was most deadly to seemingly healthy people in the 20-40 age group. The onset was very rapid and people were collapsing within hours of the first symptoms appearing; some dying within a day. In most cases, the main cause of death was attributed to severe respiratory infection followed by pneumonia and/or organ failure. Medical experts and scientists have discovered that the H5N1 strain bears striking similarities to the Spanish Flu’, particularly with the occurrences of respiratory and organ failure within its victims.

In New Zealand, between half and 1/3 of the population contracted the Spanish Flu’ and in some towns the death rate was as high as 80 percent. At the height of the epidemic, there was a three week period where ordinary life was impossible. Shops, offices and factories were forced to shut down due to high staff absenteeism and from fear of spreading the virus. The Government ordered schools, hotels and theatres to close. Ports closed, shipping came to a halt and many towns suffered from a shortage in supplies. Imagine what life would be like in New Zealand today if businesses had to close for three weeks. Is your organisation capable of surviving and managing a crisis like this?

The sceptics amongst us may think that the threat from Bird Flu’ is yet another exaggeration that can be likened to Y2K, which is being blown out of all logical proportion. However, what many people did not realise was that Y2K appeared to be a “non-event” because organisations were able to plan and prepare for it well in advance.

But, how do businesses go about planning for a crisis such as a pandemic? Consideration needs to be given to market places and suppliers. What if your suppliers are unable to supply goods that are vital to your operation? Can your organisation continue to operate with a skeleton staff and in the worst case scenario, loss of key

personnel due to death? Finally, what would be the impact if your business was forced to close its doors for three weeks? If you think this will not happen, think again.

Professor Paul Webster of the World Health Organisation's Bird Flu' Centre has described H5N1 as being likened to a "respiratory Ebola". He believes it is the worst flu' strain he has ever seen and says it is not a matter of "if", but "when" the virus will mutate to become contagious to humans.

According to health experts, H5N1 has proved to have a more lethal effect on animals than any other flu' strain known to mankind. Once a fully contagious strain of the virus emerges, global spread is inevitable. While countries can take measures, such as closure of borders to delay its spread, they will not be able to prevent it. Previous pandemics encircled the World in 6-9 months as most people travelled by ship. However, nowadays with the speed and volume of international air travel, it is anticipated that the spread of the virus would become pandemic in less than three months.

HN51: Reducing the rate of spread

Although it is unlikely that the spread of influenza can be halted, the Ministry of Health Department has published steps in its National Health Emergency Plan that may help to reduce the rate of spread of the virus and slow its advance. These measures will go some way towards protecting people and will reduce the pressure on health services over a longer period. These steps include:

- Recommending that sick people stay at home
- Caring for all, but the seriously ill at home
- Advising public against unnecessary travel
- Utilising the powers of health and medical officers to cancel public events
- Enforcing closure of childcare facilities, schools and tertiary education institutions.

The Plan also outlines the expected impact that an influenza pandemic will have on society. One of the key characteristics during a pandemic is the high level of workplace absenteeism as people fall ill or stay home to care for sick relatives. As noted in the Plan, it is right to assume that normal business activities regardless of their nature will suffer.

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