NBC News' Ridiculous Flu Scare

By Josh Bloom — September 17, 2019

The headline of an article by Erika Edwards, a health and medical reporter for NBC News, seems like nothing special.

"This year's flu season may be a bad one. Here's why you need a flu shot."

Just about what you'd expect. Has there ever been a year where health officials say "nothing to worry about folks, we're going to have a really mild flu season this year"? Not a chance. So Edwards' headline contains no news, good or bad. Zero. But the same cannot be said for the subheadline.

"There are already signs the U.S. may be in for a nasty flu season."

Uh oh. It's only September; we are not even in the flu season yet:
If we're a month from the beginning of the flu season and five months from its peak and there are signs that the US is in trouble, that's something to worry about, right?

No, it's not. Not even close. First, is it reasonable to assume that we might have a bad flu season? Yes, it is. That's because, in Australia, which reaches peak flu season in August and is still going strong in mid-September, the predominant circulating strain is H3N2 – not exactly the strain that you want to catch. H3N2, which is one of the strains of swine flu, is especially prone to mutation, so much so that it does so during the manufacturing process making the vaccine less able to cover circulating strains.

Source: [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov) [1]
The flu season in Australia. Source: Immunisation Coalition [4]

So, based on data from Australia, it is reasonable to conclude that we are indeed looking at a bad flu season. What about the claim that there is already evidence of this in the US? This one is pure nonsense. NBC News should be ashamed that it mentioned it at all:

"What’s more, a pediatric flu death has already been reported in the U.S..."

One death is evidence that “there are already signs the U.S. may be in for a nasty flu season?” Are they kidding? It would seem so, especially when the child that died was...

"[A] 4-year-old in California who had underlying health problems."

This is typical ACSH material – something we've been dealing with for 41 years – an overblown, in this case, false and misleading headline that gives the reader the impression that things are worse than they really are.

No, one death of an infant, especially one in poor health, does not say anything at all about "signs" of anything that is happening in the US. Other than that NBC News is looking for a few more readers.

Really lame reporting.
[1] https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/season/flu-season.htm