WHO's Afraid of Bird Flu?

By ACSH Staff — December 14, 2004

As if vaccine shortages, wars, terrorism and Vioxx weren't scary enough, some folks who should know better are making predictions of worldwide contagion without cure.

Officials from the World Health Organization have sounded the alarm about a "bird flu" pandemic. Spokesmen warned of billions falling sick and millions of deaths. Millions in Southeast Asia have indeed died -- but so far almost all the victims -- except for 32 humans -- have been feathered.

Outgoing U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson, in the course of his resignation remarks, morphed from his previously calm demeanor into hysteria. His bizarre farewell speech contained words of advice for terrorists about our country's weakest links -- and more bird flu warnings.

Referring to bird flu, Thompson had a dire warning: "This is a really huge bomb that could adversely impact on the healthcare of the world." Uh-oh.

Maybe Thompson can be excused his end-of-the-world predictions -- he has no science background -- but we expect the WHO to have more insight into separating real health threats from theoretical ones. Are they acting in a needlessly alarmist way? That seems to be the case.

Statements made by WHO experts noted that a bird flu pandemic "could kill up to 100 million people" -- if the virus mutated into an uncontrollable form of human influenza. One such expert advised public health officials to start planning for overwhelmed hospitals, construction of isolation wards, and widespread absenteeism -- if the pandemic occurs.

Another opined that there is "no doubt" there will be another pandemic -- global outbreaks have occurred every few decades, the last two being in 1957 and 1968.

He went on: "We are closer to the next pandemic than we have ever been before."

Oh really? We will eventually have another pandemic -- sometime in the future. We are, therefore, getting closer all the time, I guess. Worse, we won't have any vaccine to prevent this wholesale carnage for about two years -- and one of the companies trying to make such a vaccine is Chiron, whose recent efforts to produce uncontaminated flu vaccine for the United States came to naught only two months ago.

The new strain of bird flu, technically termed Influenza A(H5N1), has indeed ravaged Asian avians, as noted above. But the virus is genetically distinct from the flu bugs that infect humans every winter, and bird -- as well as other animal -- flu strains generally do not have the ability to make people sick. While it is cause for concern that 44 humans also have contracted the virus from birds or fowl, of whom 32 have died -- a worrisome mortality rate of over 70 percent compared to a mortality rate of well under 1 percent for the common flu and 5 percent for the devastating 1918-
1919 pandemic -- there are no -- as in zero -- documented cases of human to human transmission, and only two cases even suspected, one each in Thailand and Vietnam.

One major requirement for a viral epidemic would be person-to-person spread communicability.

So, should we head for the hills? No. There is no evidence of human-to-human transmission, despite many millions of sick and dead birds. And it is obviously extremely difficult to transmit infection to humans from birds; again, the numbers tell the tale.

It's a good idea to be prepared, as the recent scarcity of flu vaccine has demonstrated. But the dire warnings about billions sick and millions dead from an onrushing bird flu pandemic seem overblown, to say the least. We should keep doing the right things to avoid infection: hand washing and covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing. Public health officials should make sure to stockpile anti-flu medications, which probably would work against the avian strain, if what is now theoretical becomes real.

We also should use the methods of prevention we have -- including the vaccine against pneumonia, which is greatly underutilized, even though it protects against the proximate cause of death in the elderly suffering from severe influenza.

Also, stay home from work and seek medical attention if you're sick, and get plenty of rest. Don't stay awake worrying about bird flu -- it's bad for your health.