

Pandemic threat overblown by both experts and media

The current threat of pandemic posed by the H5N1 avian flu is a “fraud,” Ontario’s former chief medical officer of health (1987–97) told 186 public health and media professionals at a Toronto conference on June 27. “I am more frightened by the traffic I had to fight to get here than I am by the threat of bird flu,” said Dr. Richard Schabas.

“The real lesson of SARS is that it disappeared like the morning dew, not because of draconian measures like quarantine,” said Schabas, now Medical Officer of Health for the Hastings and Prince Edward Counties Health Unit. SARS “is a zoonotic disease, which is not very infective between humans, and is easy to control. We are making the same mistakes with avian flu. Above all, we need to not panic, nor to jump to conclusions. There has been no change in the behaviour of the H5N1 virus in the last 10 years.”

Schabas was speaking at “Pandemics and the Media: Global Health Challenges,” a conference to promote understanding about how to best inform the public in the event of an influenza pandemic.

Schabas contended that the WHO’s 2005 declaration of a pandemic third-stage alert for avian flu wasn’t justified as there was no substantive change in the behaviour of the disease. The decision was based on politics, and not on scientific or biological events, he said.

“The widespread acceptance of the theory that pandemic flu viruses form through adaptive mutation comes from research by American scientists who reconstructed the 1918 Spanish flu virus. In a May 2005 article in *Nature*, they observed that it looked more like a bird virus than current human flu viruses.

“An article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* [353(21):2209] went one giant step further and changed the hypothesis into an established fact. Now Canada’s national public health agency has enshrined this theory into its national pandemic plan.”

He said media need to more critical



Canapress

An Indonesian woman kisses her chicken to demonstrate that it is disease free during a protest of the government’s plan in June to kill all the poultry in Kara. Seven family members died of avian flu in the area.

of information. “Are the media being complicit or duped?” he asked. “Probably a bit of both.”

The chair of the University of Toronto’s Department of Public Health Sciences argued “the most contagious part of SARS was public fear, not the virus. Only 44 people actually died of SARS — that’s 1 in 1.4 million,” said Harvey Skinner. “But the public often misunderstands hazards when responding to risks that are out of their control.”

Some media representatives at the conference believed the public interest is being served by discussion of the risks. Tony Burman is the editor-in-chief of CBC’s English news services division, which screened *Black Dawn: The Next Pandemic*, a Fifth Estate program that chronicled the spread of avian flu.

“People want us to stop talking about it. But they are wrong. We need to keep talking about it, even if we are accused of fear-mongering,” said Burman. “This is serious business requiring serious thought.”

Bioethicist Peter Singer, former director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Bioethics, suggested journalists

could “move from traditional models of reporting to the more innovative area of public engagement.”

National Post health reporter Tom Blackwell countered that “our goals are not always the same. We are there to tell stories, not to carry public health messages as a vehicle. But we can work together and each achieve our goals.”

Ryerson School of Journalism chair and former *Globe and Mail* editor Paul Knox noted that “it’s the role of the media to ask tough questions — and the answers will play out in public. This is healthy, not something to be overcome.”

Margaret MacNeill, an associate professor of exercise sciences at the University of Toronto, who’s studying health scares in the Canadian media, noted that “epidemic terms, such as the word ‘pandemic’ are now being used to describe non-viral conditions like childhood obesity and allergies. We need to convey explicit information without creating a moral panic,” MacNeill argued. — Margot Andresen, Ottawa

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