



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

NOTE FOR THE PRESS

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Note for the media WHO/5
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WHO INFLUENZA PANDEMIC MEETING MAKES PROGRESS ON CONTAINMENT PLAN

Geneva -- An operational plan to contain an outbreak of human pandemic influenza moved closer to final form when 70 public health experts concluded three days of discussion in Geneva today.

The meeting was organized and hosted by the World Health Organization.

"A human influenza pandemic will be a big problem, but by working together we can respond effectively," said Dr. Margaret Chan, World Health Organization Assistant Director-General for Communicable Diseases and the Director-General's Representative for Pandemic Influenza.

Seasonal influenza, avian influenza and human pandemic influenza are different diseases. Seasonal flu occurs commonly and causes illness which ranges from mild to severe depending on preexisting illness. Avian influenza is an animal disease which, very rarely, infects humans. A human pandemic influenza is caused by a virus new to humans and historically, the impact of such pandemics have ranged from mild to severe. We are not experiencing a pandemic now. The current outbreak of avian influenza is caused by the virus H5N1. It is being closely monitored because, theoretically, it may mutate to become easily transmissible between humans. This would spark a human influenza pandemic and trigger the attempt at containment.

Although containing a pandemic at its source has never been tried, evidence suggesting that it may be possible has been mounting. The first outbreak of the avian influenza virus H5N1 was contained in Hong Kong in 1997 when the public health director (Dr. Margaret Chan) ordered the destruction of all poultry in Hong Kong. The containment of SARS in 2003 demonstrated that coordinated global action could stop the emergence of a new infectious disease. Last summer, theoretical models were published showing that containment of a pandemic might be possible.

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The modelling papers indicated that containing a pandemic at its source required coordinated action focused on a small area within days of the emergence of the new virus. Success, according to the modelling papers, would be dependent on many factors. These factors include early detection of the new virus, swift mobilization of resources, and compliance by the target population. Thus this week's Geneva meeting was focused on three areas: logistics, surveillance and public health measures needed to accomplish these goals.

"It may be that containment efforts will only slow the spread of a pandemic," said Dr. Chan. "But even that will buy us time so that countries can begin activating their pandemic preparedness plans and companies can begin on the lengthy process of manufacturing an effective human pandemic vaccine. "

The results of this week's meeting will be circulated for review and posted on the web as soon as they are ready.

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