

## **EDITORIAL**

### **“BIRD FLU THREAT: HOW CLOSE ARE WE”?**

Bird flu (avian flu) has been spreading across the world since 2003, killing millions of birds and over 200 human beings, mostly in South East Asia. Yet there is fear of worse to come, fears of a new pandemic, which could claim millions of lives. WHO experts point out that cross-infection to humans is still relatively rare. Most human cases of H5N1 virus infection are thought to have occurred during direct contact with sick or dead infected poultry. Other avian influenza A subtype viruses have infected humans, including low pathogenic and highly pathogenic virus strains.

The symptoms of bird flu virus infections in humans include eye infections like conjunctivitis, influenza-like illness symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat, muscle pains), and even severe respiratory illness (e.g. pneumonia, acute respiratory distress) associated with nausea, vomiting and CNS changes.

Good infection control practices eg attention to hand hygiene, and use of personal protective equipments are vital in persons exposed to poultry with avian flu. Vaccination against seasonal influenza and influenza antiviral agents for prophylaxis is also recommended. Careful observation of such persons over the next few weeks for development of symptoms of avian flu is necessary. The mortality of these cases is high. Any chance of a vaccine is yet remote, over 10 years perhaps.

Pakistan has had its share of cases, fortunately few, mostly in the farms of Northern areas and some in big cities including Karachi. WHO officials say there has been limited human transmission of bird flu in Pakistan with no new cases reported in the last few months, with the last human case reported December 6. At least eight people were infected in Pakistan's northwest in recent weeks, in the country's first human cases of bird flu. Experts believe the cases are part of a small chain of human-to-human transmission.

The avian flu caused loss of perhaps millions of poultry in our country, a potentially money making industry which was in brinks a few months ago. The public health fears on use of chicken and eggs has loomed for weeks and months and only defused by desperate reassurances on media by the health ministry. Now the human cases reported, albeit few, are a cause of concern for all of us, as we are well aware of weaknesses in reporting of even the common known diseases.

Prof Sohail Akhtar, FRCP  
Ziauddin Medical University, Karachi

## **REFERENCES:**

1. Influenza Pandemics of the 20th Century. *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 2006 Jan;12(1):9-14.
2. Current Concepts: Avian Influenza A (H5N1) Infection in Humans. *The New England Journal of Medicine* 2005 Sep 29;353(13):1374-1385.
3. Probable person-to-person transmission of avian influenza A (H5N1). *New England Journal of Medicine* 2005 Jan 27;352(4):333-40. Epub 2005 Jan 24.
4. Influenza Pandemic Preparedness. *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 2003 Dec;9(12):1645-1648
5. Outbreaks of Avian Influenza A (H5N1) in Asia & Interim Recommendations for Evaluation & Reporting of Suspected Cases --- United States, 2004. *MMWR* 2004 Feb 13;53(5):97-100.