

Scientists criticize UK government for lack of preparedness over avian flu

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Recent outbreaks of the avian influenza A (H5N1) in Germany and France have increased concerns that it is only a matter of time before the disease appears in Britain.

Speaking to the BBC, Prime Minister Tony Blair's chief scientific adviser Professor Sir David King said, "I would anticipate that avian flu will arrive at some point in the UK. We also have to anticipate that it will be here for five years plus. We are talking about the possibility of the disease being endemic here in the UK."

The current lethal strain of avian flu, which first emerged in Hong Kong in 1997, has now spread throughout Asia and Africa; in the last months, cases have been confirmed in wild birds in a number of European countries, including Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia and Slovenia. In France, the first infection of domestic farm birds occurred at Versailleux. The farm in question was 200 metres from a lake where wild ducks died of the disease.

Avian flu can be transmitted to humans who are in close contact with birds or who consume inadequately cooked meat from infected fowls. As of yet, no cases of the disease spreading to humans have been reported in Europe. Confirmation that a cat in Germany has died from the disease, however, has raised fears that the virus could potentially mutate into a human virus.

Samuel Jutzi, director of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, has said, "We need to be aware that there's a real risk for Europe when the birds migrate northwards this spring."

A more detailed understanding of bird migration would be necessary in the fight against avian flu. The executive director of the United Nations Environment Programmes, Klaus Toepfer, has observed, "There are important gaps in our scientific knowledge about 'fly-ways' and migratory routes for some species. We need to urgently bridge that gap."

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory

Species of Wild Animals has set up a task force to investigate how the virus is transmitted between wild and domestic birds and which migration routes pose the greatest danger of spreading the disease.

The British government, however, has so far refused to insist that free-range birds be confined indoors, as is now the case in the Netherlands and Germany, for example, or to begin a vaccination programme. Blair has said that he is "satisfied, in so far as it is possible, that we have got all the necessary precautions in place," to deal with an outbreak.

Under current plans, should the disease be confirmed in Britain, all birds suspected of exposure will be destroyed along with eggs and the area subject to a 3-kilometre protection zone for 21 days. Beyond this, a 10-kilometre surveillance zone would be created in which all birds would be kept indoors, markets and fairs banned, and the movement of poultry and eggs restricted.

However, Britain's record in controlling epizootics is abysmal. It failed to contain the foot and mouth outbreak amongst livestock in 2001, when it also dragged its feet and refused to use vaccination.

Moreover, the complacency of successive British governments over animal health has already led to the emergence of a new human disease in the form of New Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. The fatal brain-wasting disorder is thought to have resulted from cattle infected with Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy passing into the human food chain.

Foot and mouth rarely infects humans and is not serious when it does. But the same failed strategy of isolation and mass culling is to be employed in dealing with avian flu.

The great danger of the British government's inaction is that it increases the opportunity for the H5N1 strain to take hold and mutate.

Britain is second only to France in Europe in the production of poultry meat—more than 1.5 million tonnes

in 2004. The industry, which employs 50,000 people, had exports worth £250 million in 2004. Just 200 farms account for 95 percent of production, and many farmers have argued that the cost and inconvenience of preventive measures are too great.

Some scientists and experts have highlighted the dangers of the government's approach, among them John Oxford, Professor of Virology at St. Bartholomew's and the Royal London Hospital, who has said the government should follow the example of the Netherlands and start a vaccination programme.

The Dutch government has begun a programme to vaccinate poultry flocks against the current threat. In 2003, an outbreak of avian flu amongst poultry in the Netherlands involving an H7N7 type virus—a less lethal strain than H5N1—left one person dead and 300 people infected.

Professor Oxford said of the Dutch response; “Science is pushing them.... [T]hey have done a lot of work.... [T]hey are very knowledgeable.... [T]here has been a lot of investment over the last two years.”

He condemned the British government's passivity saying, “No action is going to be taken until a proven isolation of the virus from within the country [occurs].... [A]s a virologist that does not ring a very solid notion in my head.”

Refuting accusations that he was overreacting, Oxford compared the current situation to that of 1917 when the newly arrived infection, soon to be known as Spanish flu, initially led to the death of 100 soldiers. By the next year, the number dead from the infection worldwide was 50 million.

Asked if he thought that the virus could become less virulent, he said that it was possible but described the virus as very aggressive and a “scarlet pimpernel.” The death of the cat in Germany meant it was necessary to prepare for the danger of the flu strain becoming capable of human-to-human transmission, he warned.



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