

Britain unprepared for bird flu threat

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On April 6 the Scottish Executive announced that a dead swan found in the harbour of the small seaside village of Cellardyke in Scotland was infected with the highly contagious bird flu virus H5N1.

The bird had been found on March 29, but from the state of the body it had probably been dead several weeks. The corpse was sent to the European Union (EU) laboratory in Weybridge, Surrey. It had been found by a local inhabitant, Tina Briscoe, who reported it to the authorities. She expressed concern that the body of the swan was not retrieved until the day after she reported it.

Once it was confirmed as an H5N1 infection, a 3 kilometre protection zone was set up around the site. Within this zone all poultry had to be brought indoors and all flocks were tested for the infection. A wider 10 kilometre surveillance zone was set up around the point of infection, in which the transport of poultry is restricted and meetings such as animal fairs are banned.

Concern was expressed that it took over a week for the Weybridge laboratory to confirm the disease. The laboratory was closed at weekends and this contributed to the delay in getting the result.

Farmers within the wider surveillance zone said that days after the virus infection had been confirmed, they had still not been informed by the government what steps to take to protect their health and that of their families.

Patrick Holden, director of the Soil Association (an organic producers lobby group), called for more remedial action. "The situation is frighteningly reminiscent of the foot and mouth (a highly infectious disease affecting cattle, sheep and pigs) crisis of 2001, when they left it too late and had to burn thousands of animals on giant pyres," he said. "Ring vaccination of poultry on farms around an outbreak is crucial to prevent the virus spreading. It's worked in France and other countries."

He had written to the Department for Environment, Food and Agriculture asking them for details of their ring vaccination plans, but DEFRA had not replied.

Farmers in other parts of the country have criticised the government's advice as confusing. The *Sunday Telegraph* of April 9 quoted Tim Wood, a Somerset-based farmer supplying free range eggs: "We've been told to cover our pens with netting but my chickens run free over 75 acres. It is completely unfeasible for me to cover this whole area with wire netting. The situation is totally chaotic."

Steve Ledsham, a Cheshire-based organic farmer, explained: "DEFRA has provided us with excessive amounts of information and documents, written in ridiculous technical jargon, so that we are left confused about what their advice really is."

Because the dead swan when found was headless and in an advanced state of decomposition, it was not immediately possible to identify what breed it was. Identifying the particular species of an infected bird could be important in giving clues as to how it had become infected. A native species would indicate it had picked up the infection from another bird, whereas a migratory bird might have been infected in the country from which it flew.

It took 12 days to identify the swan found at Cellardyke as a Whooper Swan. Identification was based on its DNA pattern. The British-based Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) emphasised the importance of correct identification. They stated: "Making sure the bird is properly identified is a crucial part of assembling the jigsaw that is bird flu. Poor attempts in other parts of the world have severely hampered investigations. There is the expectation that the UK Government would be able to identify for certain any bird found with bird flu in this country. I can't emphasise enough how important it is that they get it right."

Whooper Swans are migratory and the bird is likely to have been infected prior to arriving in Britain. A BBC news report stated: “Whitehall (government) sources told the BBC a ‘working hypothesis’ is the bird could have died in another country and been washed up on the Scottish coast.”

Andre Farrar, RSPB spokesman, stated: “The likeliest scenario—and this has to be in the realms of speculation—is that the bird may have set off on its journey northwards, got part of the way across the North Sea, felt grotty, and landed on or fell into the sea, died and was washed into Cellardyke.”

The fact that the H5N1 virus type identified was almost identical to that of the virus found in Ruegen in Germany last month would also fit this scenario. Professor Hugh Pennington, a microbiologist based at Aberdeen University, explained: “This raises the likelihood that it had no contact with any native birds and that this case of H5N1 on our shores was a one-off.”

Since the H5N1 infection was confirmed in the swan found in Cellardyke, tests on dead wild birds found throughout the country, but especially in the immediate area, have been stepped up. According to DEFRA, all these tests have proved negative. However, the April 12 edition of the magazine *New Scientist* featured its investigation into these tests and suggested that they may be flawed. It explained:

“Suspensions have been raised because DEFRA’s tests revealed none of the ordinary flu that ducks and geese normally carry. Of the 3343 faecal samples from wild birds taken for DEFRA by the conservation group the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) in December, only two were shown to contain low-pathogenicity bird flu -0.06 percent.”

The *New Scientist* spoke to Bjorn Olsen of the University of Kalmar in Sweden, who said, “There’s something wrong with those numbers.”

He is responsible for conducting bird flu tests in Europe and carries out around 10,000 such tests each year. He explained that in tests he had performed in December 1 percent of dabbling ducks and 10 percent of geese would be carrying low-pathogenicity bird flu.

Dr. Olsen told the *Guardian* newspaper how in Britain, when carrying out the test, the faecal swabs were put in a dry plastic tube which was then put in a fridge. “If you left a swab in the refrigerator like that, it

would dry out and you’d lose all your virus,” he said.

The swab should be immersed in saline and then frozen, he explained. His comments were backed up by Professor Pennington, who stated, “There are genuine issues here about whether DEFRA is using the right system or not.”

To date it would seem that the swan found in Cellardyke was an isolated case, but it is highly probable that the virus will arrive in Britain at some point. The response and questions raised over the Cellardyke case would indicate that in spite of the government’s boasts to the contrary, preparedness for bird flu is woefully inadequate.



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