

CDC video downplays danger of H5N1 bird flu

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The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a video the day after the presidential election in which CDC epidemiologist Dr. Denisse Vega Ocasio informs her audience about the symptoms of H5N1 avian influenza.

The brief statement, no more than a public service announcement, described symptoms identical to those of seasonal influenza and raised no alarm about the public health threat if direct human-to-human transmission of H5N1 should take place.

Tweets from health care providers and scientific observers have attacked the video as a deliberate effort to mislead the public and downplay the dangers.

Sara Ann Willette, a frequent commentator on CDC policies, noted: “This PSA is because either H5 is already spreading or the CDC expects it will.”

The video starkly illustrates the degree to which public health authorities have abdicated their responsibility to prevent the spread of H5N1 and eliminate the threat of its emergence as the next pandemic.

M. Elisabeth, a pediatric intensive care unit and emergency department nurse at Boston Children’s and who has been active in reporting on the COVID pandemic, posted on X/Twitter: “I think it’s legitimate to ask the @CDCFlu @CDCDirector why this was posted without any context and to ask whether there has been human to human transmission. The general public shouldn’t need to get this message if transmission has been restricted to farm workers.”

Surely they would not have released such a video if they believed the likelihood of additional human H5N1 cases was low. The implication is clearly that they have resigned themselves to the inevitability of human H5N1 transmission, a situation made much more likely by their lack of action.

The timing of the video, coming the day after the re-election of Donald Trump to the presidency, is also quite telling. Trump has fomented the most depraved anti-science COVID conspiracy theories and promised that the anti-vaccination fraudster Robert F. Kennedy Jr. will have a major “health related” role in his administration.

Elon Musk, another major financial and political backer of Trump, who is also set to have a major role in the new Trump administration, has promulgated numerous discredited anti-

vaccination theories on his social media platform X/Twitter.

The CDC video therefore also signals the surrender of public authorities to the incoming administration and its virulent anti-public health, anti-science tendencies and policy proposals. They will not challenge the politicians and their agenda to dismantle the public health system and subordinate the public’s health to private profit.

All this comes as H5N1 continues on the march worldwide, in what has been described as a panzootic event, that is, a pandemic that affects many species of animals. Over 50 mammalian species, including humans, have been succumbing to H5N1 across the globe, in addition to its devastating impact on bird populations.

California on Tuesday confirmed two new cases of H5N1 in cattle, as reported on the US Department of Agriculture’s website, for a total of 160 cases there. The day prior, Utah also confirmed a new case in cattle. There have been a total of 148 new cases of H5N1 in cattle in three states in the last 30 days.

This comes as scientists reported just last week that H5N1 has devastated Caspian tern populations in the state of Washington. The infections in terns were associated with 15 deaths of harbor seals on the Washington coast. Although seals and sea lions had died from H5N1 in other parts of the world, especially South America, these were the first North American seal populations impacted.

Notably, the scientists also found that the dead seals had significant brain inflammation. This finding is consistent with past research showing that many influenza viruses, including H5N1, can enter the brain and cause inflammation and death of brain cells.

Key symptoms of such brain effects of influenza include headaches, a key symptom noted on the CDC’s video. Another sign is subconjunctival hemorrhage or blood accumulation in the white part of the eye. Notably, at least one human H5N1 case in Colorado this year had such a hemorrhage. Such hemorrhage can also be confused with conjunctivitis or inflammation of the white part of the eye, which imparts a red or “pink eye” appearance.

The total number of human cases of H5N1 in the US now stands at 46, with 21 in California, 11 in Washington, and 10 in Colorado. All the California cases were associated with

exposure to infected cattle, whereas most of the Colorado and Washington cases were associated with exposure to infected poultry.

A recent study shows these numbers to be significant undercounts. The study took blood samples from 115 farmworkers at two farms in Colorado and Michigan over a three month period. They tested the serum fraction of the blood for antibodies to the H5N1 virus. They also interviewed the farmworkers for history of any symptoms.

Overall, eight of the workers had such antibodies, for a seroprevalence rate of 7 percent. Of those eight only four had symptoms, suggesting an asymptomatic infection rate of 50 percent. Thus, on two farms in two states, four infections were asymptomatic, and all eight infections were not previously detected by the public health system.

Given the widespread lack of testing and surveillance, many more farms and farmworkers have likely been infected across the country. Notably, none of the eight cases found by the study are counted among the 46 cases reported by the CDC.

Also, H5N1 has been detected in wastewater surveillance, most recently in Los Angeles and other parts of California. The levels of H5N1 in California wastewater have been increasing. The source of the H5N1 and how it is getting into wastewater are currently unknown. Authorities in Los Angeles are investigating.

A study done in Ireland suggests that runoff carries avian waste and thus the presence of H5N1 and other avian influenza viruses in wastewater has a substantial animal origin. A similar study done in the US also suggests animal sources can cause H5N1 to appear in wastewater.

Although it is perhaps reassuring that the H5N1 in wastewater does not necessarily represent human-to-human spread of H5N1, it does nevertheless complicate the use of wastewater surveillance to track a potential pandemic. It is difficult to differentiate host sources of H5N1 and attribute them proportionately.

Although some observers also point to the lack of fatalities among the cases detected in the US as a reassuring sign, two points are worth noting. First, many of the human H5N1 cases detected received the anti-viral drug oseltamivir. Although it is not possible to know for certain that the drug prevented death in these cases, the drug has been proven to prevent deaths from seasonal influenza.

The availability of oseltamivir to treat H5N1 infection is helpful, but experts have noted that the United States stockpile of the drug is wholly inadequate for a pandemic.

“Our antiviral supply for influenza is inadequate,” said Rick Bright, immunologist and former director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority. “We need to diversify it—and even that is not enough, with what we have approved.”

The second issue with respect to mortality is that a novel H5N1 “reassortment” in Cambodia that emerged in late 2023,

and only reported this week, has a case fatality rate of 42.8 percent.

A “reassortment” is when genes from one strain of influenza are merged into the genome of another strain in a host that is co-infected with both strains. The reassortment in Cambodia combined segments from influenza H5N1 clade 2.3.2.1c and clade 2.3.4.4b viruses.

Experts fear that a reassortment between H5N1 and seasonal influenza viruses could serve as the spark for the next pandemic. The 2009 “swine flu” pandemic was triggered by such a reassortment that occurred in pigs.

Highlighting the extraordinary risk, H5N1 infection was reported in pigs for the first time last week. The infection was found in pigs in a backyard farm in Oregon, not far from the ongoing H5N1 activity in multiple species including humans in Washington.

Were China the nation that was inexcusably reacting in slow motion, as a matter of official policy, to a fast-emerging potential pandemic, the ruling class of the United States would be apoplectic. Their hypocrisy in criticizing China over COVID-19 while deliberately enabling H5N1 to develop into a pandemic is extraordinary.

The CDC video is a warning to the working class. The ruling class has made a declaration of capitulation to the H5N1 virus.

The working class is being left to fend for itself. The ruling class leaves the working class merely to monitor for nonspecific symptoms that are associated with seasonal influenza that occurs every year, and report them to a healthcare provider. And of course that presumes that one has affordable access to healthcare and a local healthcare provider.

Besides monitoring for symptoms of influenza, as well as implementing non-pharmaceutical measures such as masking, air purification and social distancing, the working class must proactively organize its own independent political program to overthrow the capitalist system that prioritizes profit over the public’s health.



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