

An extract from:

Stopping HPAI H5N1: A complex communication challenge and landscape

Risk communication has been described as something that "...uses responsible speculation, it acknowledges uncertainty, it shares dilemmas about what to do, and it does not aim for zero fear."

Avian Influenza communication campaign strategies are working on the perception of risk in the public imagination, to catalyse change in behaviours and practices of millions of poultry producers, traders and sellers. However, Knowledge-Attitude-Practices (KAP) studies in several countries, as well as anthropological studies in some countries indicate, that while levels of awareness about the disease are high, the same has not translated into changes in behaviours. Clearly, poor communities and poultry farmers perceive the risk of avian influenza infections to themselves and their poultry as very low, especially in relation to other competing priorities. The 'international community' on the other hand, and especially the media and the on-line community seem to be seized with outbreak narratives and disaster metaphors, conjuring up a politics of fear and blame. The associated emergency/crisis responses have tended to focus on the outbreaks themselves i.e. on disease incidence, and not on underlying factors or the drivers of disease emergence and spread.

Historically, and from a public health point of view, the story of global influenza pandemics has its roots in the 1918 "Spanish Flu" pandemic when an estimated 50 million people were killed. Two other pandemics -- the "Asian Flu" of 1957 and the "Hong Kong Flu" of 1968, respectively killed about 5 million and 1.5 million people world-wide. All three pandemics were sparked by influenza viruses of avian origin.

The story of a new 21st century virus with pandemic potential can be traced to the outbreaks of avian influenza in chickens in 1997 in Hong Kong, when 18 people were infected, and six of whom died (Nerlich and Halliday, 2007).

As a response measure to control this new and highly pathogenic avian influenza virus named H5N1, which seemed to have jumped the species barrier from birds to humans, over 1.6 million poultry were slaughtered within a very short time in Hong Kong and all exports banned. When no more human cases were reported, the disease was assumed to have been eradicated.

However, in 2003, there were further outbreaks of the H5N1 virus among poultry in Hong Kong, causing two human infections, including one which resulted in death. From 2003 onwards, the virus rapidly spread to several other countries in the South East Asia region, and subsequently reached Europe and Africa. Since 2003, the disease has

affected about 60 countries, and over 250 million poultry have either died or have been destroyed as a result of the disease. As of 10 March 2009, the cumulative number of human cases and deaths due to infection by the H5N1 virus, reported officially to the WHO since 2003, stood at 410 cases including 256 deaths (WHO 2009). Practically all the human cases have been linked to the handling of sick and infected poultry and poultry products. However, scientists have so far been unable to explain the extraordinarily small number of human cases despite the millions of people who are in daily and direct contact with poultry and poultry products. The scientists continue to worry about the virus mutating, and sparking a human influenza pandemic.

According to Menon (2008), the tone of the rhetoric that ultimately shaped the current collective “imagination” around avian and human pandemic influenza, was set in September 2005, when the world was warned that up to 150 million people could be afflicted by the H5N1 virus. In subsequent months, the World Bank claimed that a human pandemic triggered by avian influenza could cost the global economy up to US \$ 2 trillion. The World Health Organisation warned that mankind may never have had a greater risk of a deadly epidemic, and the US Centers for Disease Control further fuelled public imagination by stating: “We know that a pandemic will eventually occur. We always say it’s not a question of if; it’s a question of when.” According to Menon (2008): “The threat of a pandemic immediately catalysed responses ranging over a wide spectrum of views and found expression in lengthy academic articles and weighty tomes, media reports, opinion columns, speeches and press releases.” It also prompted a flood of scientific meetings and international donor conferences. The explosion of reports in the print and visual media, the Internet, as well as scientific conferences, constantly referenced and built on the dis-embedded memory of the human pandemics of 1918, 1957 and 1968, and their devastating human death toll, and at the same time drew on the more recent memories of the SARS epidemic in South East Asia. Playing on the uncertainty of when, and not if, the H5N1 virus might mutate from afflicting poultry to one that would rampage through human populations, the public imagination was fuelled by a rhetoric of fear. Furthermore, the rhetoric, according to Nerlich and Halliday (2007) while “implicating the need for appropriate ‘actions’, has an air of ambiguity as to the nature of these actions, when to execute them and how many governmental resources should be allocated to them.”

As hundreds of millions of chicken and ducks were slaughtered across the world in a bid to stop the spread of the disease, the visual media were saturated by images of poultry culling operations and which became iconic of the virus and the disease.

Poultry market shocks and disruptions as a result of negative consumer reactions which invariably followed reports of avian flu outbreaks within a country, sometimes showed transboundary effects when outbreaks in one country resulted in market shocks in other countries, which were geographically far removed.

According to Nerlich and Halliday (2007), the patterns of discourse clustered around: “... a scientific discourse of ‘early warnings’ which, once it entered the sphere of the media, contributed to a ‘rhetoric of fear’ in the newspapers that reported them and a governmental discourse of ‘wait and see’ which contributed to a ‘rhetoric of blame’ in the media.” The two discourses together contributed to a general discourse of uncertainty.

The scientific discourse was suffused by the use and repetition of adjectives describing the pandemic as ‘imminent’, ‘ominous’, ‘inevitable’, and ‘overdue’. Furthermore, the

media amplified the rhetoric as 'a virus and disease that recognises no borders', and 'a virus and disease that has jumped the species barrier', creating further imagined vulnerabilities and driving scores of national governments to scramble and stockpile millions of doses of Tamiflu, and place advance orders for vaccines that were yet to be developed, against pandemic influenza. The discourse of uncertainty found further expression when international guidance on preparedness for 'the next pandemic' called for developing business continuity and contingency plans; and based on 'risk communications', 'attack rates', 'case fatality ratios', and 'scenario modelling', national governments were encouraged to conduct desk-top and full-scale field simulation exercises of an "imagined" pandemic situation, involving thousands of people within and across countries.

According to Scoones et al (2008), the international response to avian and pandemic influenza has been dominated by an overarching "outbreak narrative", with features that create a particular style of policy and politics. According to them, "A central feature is public fear and worry which permeates public and media debates". Furthermore, it involves the construction of "the other" – that is, "dangerous places and people where diseases come from, and something to be feared". Yet another feature of outbreak narratives is that it "focuses on western anxieties about globalisation – that we are all connected, and can all be affected, by diseases or disasters that spread across the globe", and that such outbreaks "emerge from disrupted, primordial settings" pushed out of equilibrium. In these global narratives, this becomes linked to "concerns about protecting the conditions of modernity, where disease is controlled, unlike in the primitive, backward, unregulated contexts where diseases emerge."

Even as the global politics of avian and pandemic influenza were being played out in high-level ministerial and donor meetings, on the ground -- millions of poor poultry farmers have been at the rough end of emergency disease control measures which included massive culling of poultry in outbreak areas, causing disruptions in lives and livelihoods.

Simultaneously, to prevent spread of the disease and stop human infections, national avian influenza communication campaigns to promote changes in behaviours and practices have been launched in scores of countries, using both mass media and inter-personal communication methods. Outbreak and risk communication strategies are being used to educate and influence communities to take action and change age-old poultry-keeping practices. But the outbreak narratives, and their associated emergency/crisis responses, have tended to focus on the outbreaks themselves i.e. on disease incidence, and not on underlying factors or the drivers of disease emergence and spread.

Globally, and over the past several decades, one new infectious disease has been emerging each year. Seventy percent of these diseases are zoonotic (i.e. they are of animal origin and can infect humans). Many of these emerging infectious diseases (EIDs) are also transboundary in nature, spreading well beyond their source of geographical origin (e.g., HIV, SARS, and avian influenza, to name a few). Several interrelated factors and global trends have contributed to the emergence, spread, and entrenchment of infectious diseases.

In 2007, over 21 billion food animals were produced to help feed a global population of over 6 billion people. By 2020, this demand for animal protein is expected to rise by over

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50%. By 2025, the total population of the world is expected to rise to nearly 8 billion people, and 90% of this population explosion is expected to take place in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Although poverty will continue to rise in absolute terms, several Asian countries such as India and China are experiencing massive economic growth which is fuelling greater urbanisation and demand for animal protein, leading to unbelievable levels of intensification of livestock production, including poultry. To meet worldwide demand, globally interconnected transport systems are rapidly moving live animals and animal products from one part of the globe to another, often quicker than the incubation period of many disease-causing viruses. Climate change, combined with large-scale deforestation, land encroachment, and the global movement and trade of animals and animal products, is triggering the emergence of exotic, zoonotic diseases in countries and latitudes which have never experienced those diseases. Highly pathogenic avian influenza is only one such disease.

In October 2008, the Government of Egypt hosted the sixth in a series of international ministerial conferences on avian and pandemic influenza. Attended by over 500 participants, the conference witnessed the release of the “One World, One Health” document, described as “A Strategic Framework for Reducing Risks of Infectious Diseases at the Animal – Human – Ecosystems Interface”. The framework calls for working and intervening at the animal-human ecosystems interface to prevent the emergence and spread of infectious diseases. And the slogan “One World One Health” captures the interconnected, globalized context within which the strategy is to be implemented. The conference also witnessed a pledging session by donors, which brought the cumulative total of pledges since the first pledging conference for avian and pandemic influenza in Beijing, to over 3 billion US dollars.

It is now a critical imperative, that the communication response to stop HPAI H5N1 be truly embedded in a multi-disciplinary approach. Furthermore, strategic advocacy and communication for risk reduction needs to be driven by a balance of high-level policy advocacy and ground-level dialogical processes.

These past few years, FAO has been very active in the provision of technical assistance to national authorities and building capacities for strategic communication planning. It has taken a multidisciplinary approach, through collaborating closely with epidemiology, biosecurity, socioeconomic and compensation experts. Four major regional multi-disciplinary workshops in communication planning and skill-building for prevention and control of Avian Influenza have been held for North Africa, West and Central Africa, Central Asia, and East Africa, involving 40 countries and over 100 participants and partners. Furthermore, FAO has led Integrated National Action Plan (INAP) assessments in nearly 30 countries of sub-Saharan Africa. This is an initiative of the Alive Platform, and jointly organized by FAO, the World Bank, the African Union / Interafrican Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR), OIE and WHO, and includes assessing communication capacities and preparedness, and formulating planning assistance for HPAI communication strategies.

The overwhelming majority of the 40 countries who participated in the four regional communication skills-building and planning workshops, as well as the 30 INAP missions to Sub-Saharan Africa, have systematically identified and prioritised their need for support in:

1. Building in-country communication capacities, competencies and leadership.
2. Developing effective and evidence-based communication strategies and interventions.

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3. Strengthening in-country collaboration and coordination.

Furthermore, the key thematic areas for focused support have been identified as : (1) Promoting and establishing appropriate bio-security as a professional/social norm along the whole production/marketing chain, especially in resource-poor settings, to ensure safe livestock production and market practices (in commercial, semi-commercial, backyard systems); (2) Promoting community-based surveillance /reporting, and active public engagement in control measures in case of outbreaks; (3) New ways of effectively and strategically collaborating at the animal-human-ecosystems interface; (4) Advocacy to ensure greater integration between national animal and public health systems and supporting public-private partnerships in terms of communication strategies, interventions and research.

To respond to these complex challenges of a global nature, there is clear need for a bold, ambitious, innovative and international program towards rapidly building a critical mass of globally networked, in-country, communication practitioners and specialists with appropriate competencies and leadership skills.

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