



news from the region

CAMBODIA: 'Bird flu' survivor helps to warn communities of disease threat

Kandal, Otdar Meanchey and Kampong Speu, February 2009

Keng Sopheak, 19, contracted avian influenza (AI) in December 2008 and is the only known sufferer to survive the infection in Cambodia.

"I did not know bird flu was dangerous until I caught it from preparing and eating a chicken that died of disease. When the doctor told me that seven people in Cambodia had died from it and I was the only one that survived, I felt very lucky."

Sopheak, having previously paid little attention to warnings about HPAI on TV and radio, vowed to help others to protect themselves from the infection. He now travels around Cambodia participating in AI forums organised by FAO and the Department of Animal Health and Production (DAHP), warning villagers that preparing sick and dead poultry to eat can be risky.

"Now I feel it is my responsibility to share my experience on how I got the virus and let other people understand that slaughtering sick and dead poultry is dangerous"

FAO and DAHP conduct community and market forums around the country to create awareness that AI is different from other poultry diseases (which in Cambodia are often considered natural, not worth reporting and sick or dead poultry safe to eat), and can be transmitted from poultry to people.

"People in the forums always ask me what the symptoms of bird flu are and what's the difference

between this and normal flu" Sopheak says. He explains to villagers that the symptoms are similar but AI causes strong muscle pains and difficulty in breathing, which get stronger as time passes. He also explains what people can do to protect themselves, such as not slaughtering sick and dead birds, covering hands and mouths when handling sick or dead birds and washing hands with soap afterwards.

The community forums have been effective in encouraging people to change their risky practices. According to an assessment of the forums, conducted by Market Strategy and Development Ltd. (MSD) and TNS/Gallup International Vietnam from September 2008 to January 2009, almost every respondent confirmed that they had taken some action to protect their poultry (and themselves), within one month of the intervention. The most common measures included 'keeping poultry in a clean environment' (82% from 70% before the intervention); 'wash hands with soap and water' (68% from 55%) and 'separate sick from health poultry' (59% from 41%).



Sopheak speaks about his experiences at a community meeting (FAO 2009)

Source: FAO ECTAD News Edition 5. Available at:
<ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/011/ak060e/ak060e00.pdf>