

Avian Flu and Crisis Emergency Risk Communication

A “Teachable
Moment”?



Kristine A. Smith, M.A.
NYS Department of Health
June 22, 2005

H5N1 in Asia

Unprecedented highly pathogenic avian influenza A (H5N1) outbreak among poultry in 2003-04

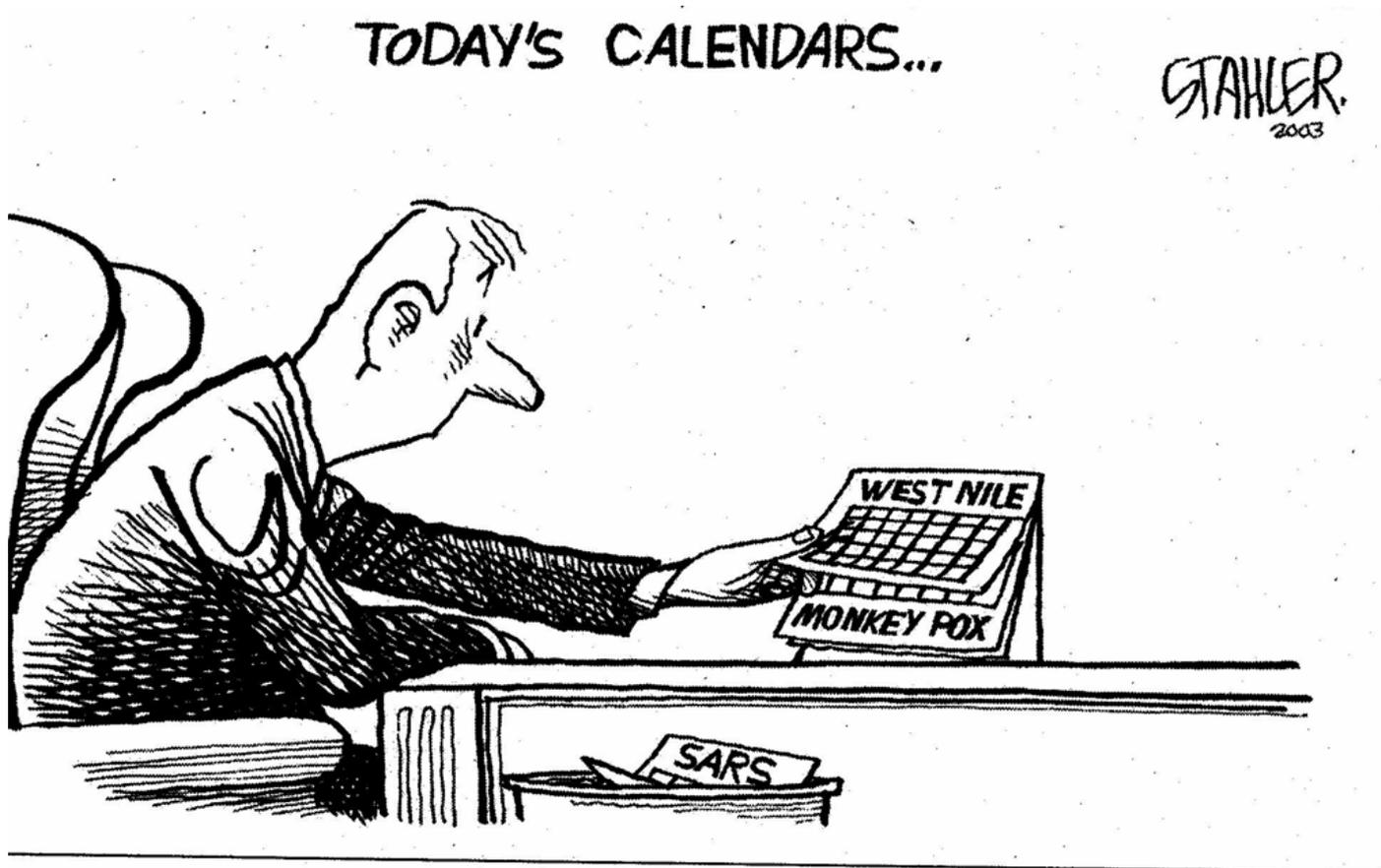
- Farms, backyard flocks affected
- Millions of chickens, ducks died; >100 million culled
- 9 countries reported H5N1 poultry outbreaks
- Now considered endemic in birds in several countries (eg, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, China)

Human H5N1 Cases 2004

44 Confirmed human H5N1 cases, 32 deaths

- Thailand: 17 confirmed cases, 12 deaths
- Vietnam: 27 confirmed cases, 20 deaths
 - Overall case fatality: 73%
- Most cases had contact with sick or dead poultry
- Majority of cases: children, young adults
- Viruses resistant to antiviral drugs amantadine, rimantadine (susceptible to oseltamivir)
- No evidence of genetic reassortment
- No evidence of sustained human-to-human transmission
- No currently-available human H5N1 vaccine

The Next Media Crisis “*du Jour*?”



Let's Go to the Headlines!

CNN: *Monday, December 13, 2004*

WHO warns of dire flu pandemic

“The World Health Organization has issued a dramatic warning that bird flu will trigger an international pandemic that could kill up to seven million people.”

National Geographic News: *May 25, 2005*

World Unprepared for "Bird Flu" Pandemic, Experts Say

“A global influenza pandemic, like the "Spanish flu" of 1918, could leave tens of millions dead. Many experts insist that the world is unprepared, and overdue, for just such a catastrophe...”

Reuters: *May 27, 2005*

Is U.S. Prepared for Bird Flu Pandemic?

“The United States remains woefully unprepared for an influenza pandemic that could kill millions of Americans...”

Associated Press: June 10, 2005

WHO Urges Vigilance Over Bird Flu Virus

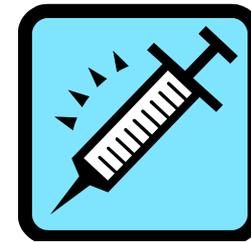
“A top World Health Organization official Friday warned that the avian flu virus is evolving quickly and urged heightened vigilance because the strain in China appears to have increased in virulence...”

But Who (besides WHO) Really cares?

- OK, the experts care, but
- ***John Q. Public is apathetic!*** (That's a *problem* because...)

NOW is the “Teachable Moment”

- We need an “INFORMATION INOCULATION”
- It will trigger an adjustment reaction



Risk Perception and the “Adjustment Reaction” to an Emerging Threat

- People pause—and stop doing things that suddenly seem dangerous
- They become hyper-vigilant
- They take it *personally*
- They take extra precautions
- Happens automatically
- Happens early on
- It’s temporary
- It’s a small overreaction
- It serves as “vicarious rehearsal”

– Source: Peter Sandman

People “Adjust” Accordingly

- This reduces the probability of later over-reaction
- Breaks through the mental noise!
 - Think about the “unthinkable”
 - If/then action plan

People Want Things to Do

- Three part action plan:
 - The minimum they *need* to do
 - Something else they *should* do if at all possible
 - Something else they *could* do if they need to enhance their sense of control

What Should *We* Do?

- Encourage people's adjustment reactions in a "crisis"
- Legitimize concerns
- Guide their reactions
 - Admit uncertainty
 - Recommend substitute precautions (e.g. "call your doctor" or check Health Dept. web site v. going to Emergency Room)

The Dilemma: We're Not Sure What to Recommend

- CDC experts undecided on “low tech” approaches
- Might not help, but won't hurt...
 - Handwashing
 - Respiratory hygiene
 - Masks
- Too much emphasis on these strategies this past flu season?
- What's the alternative?
 - Duct tape and plastic?

Pre-Event Message Map #1

What should the public know, *now*?

- Experts believe a pandemic flu outbreak can happen at any time.
- U.S. and the world community is prepared to respond
- Pandemic flu is more serious than seasonal flu because it poses a greater threat to health and our way of life
 - 3 of 4 people who have gotten bird flu have died
 - Pandemic flu will last longer than regular flu and will come in waves
 - While we won't have vaccine available immediately, there are steps people can take to stay healthy

• *Source: HHS working group draft document*

Pre-Event Message Map #2

Pandemic flu v. “garden variety”

- Pandemic flu is much more dangerous
- Pandemic flu is much more unpredictable
- Pandemic flu may profoundly affect all people
 - There will not be enough medical support to treat/care for all in need
 - There may be new rules put in place (I&Q, travel restrictions)
 - Everyday activities may be cancelled and basic services may be affected.

• *Source: HHS working group draft document*

Pre-Event Message Map #3

Effectiveness of “low tech” measures

- Pandemic flu will require stricter steps to help protect people from infection
- People who become sick during a pandemic may need to go to the hospital or stay home
- Vaccination will be the most important way to protect people
 - Vaccine supplies will initially be limited
 - It will take several months to produce enough vaccine to protect everyone
 - ***Certain people in priority groups will be vaccinated first***

• *Source: HHS working group draft document*

To Prevent Pandemic Panic

“Inevitably, fairness will be a key issue. In a widespread public health crisis, scarce medical supplies will need to be allocated to those in the most critical occupations rather than to those who are most vulnerable; cops and waterworks managers and nurses will get priority over seniors and children. We need to think this through now, balancing practicality and compassion.”

Source: Peter Sandman

The Teachable Moment!

- People need to prepare cognitively (information inoculation)
- They need to prepare logistically—first aid kit, week’s worth of supplies
- They need to prepare emotionally (people adjust to new threats in stages)
- **We** need their help and their advice (“Listen and address concerns” is the first rule of Risk Communication)
- We need their **buy-in!**
- Decisions that aren’t publicly debated are exceedingly vulnerable to **Monday morning quarterbacking**

Best Practices

Source: Vincent Covello

- Involve stakeholders as legitimate partners
 - Involve others early
 - Use a wide range of channels
- Listen to people
 - Don't make assumptions about how they feel
- Be truthful, honest, frank and open
 - Be first, be right, be credible
- Coordinate, collaborate and partner with other credible sources
 - Use trusted leaders
 - Validate your message
- Meet the needs of the media
 - Respect deadlines
 - Know you're on the record
 - Tell the truth
- Speak clearly and with compassion
 - Don't get technical
 - Personalize risk data
 - Promise only what you can deliver
- Plan thoroughly and carefully
 - Know your objectives
 - Know stakeholder and sub-groups
 - Pre-test messages

Instead of Blaming the Messenger...

Shape the message!

