

'Fighting avian influenza requires information, communication and thinking outside the box'



Avian influenza outbreak, pandemic preparedness and influenza pandemic are now commonly used terms in the Pacific Islands region. But do our people fully understand what they mean? Are they aware of the potential implications for them if influenza pandemics invade our shores? Are the people who are working in all sectors of government, the private sector, civil society and communities well informed about influenza pandemics? And, most importantly, do they understand the roles they may need to play if there is an outbreak in any of the countries or territories in the region?

The answers to these questions and others will provide some idea of whether or not the region is fully informed and prepared for such an eventuality.

All Pacific Island countries and territories now have an individual plan to respond to an avian influenza outbreak or influenza pandemic. But, how complete is each plan, how ready is it for action, and, most importantly, how well known is it across a range of stakeholders in the countries? The answers vary widely. Does the plan cover sectors outside the health sector – including power utilities, water supply, transportation (land, sea and air), communication, food security, law and order and public security – that will need to be fully operational in the event of a pandemic?

There is a shortage of health-care specialists and animal health specialists in the region. Our laboratories are the front line of our defence. They provide the region's diagnostic ability that will carry out the tests required to confirm an outbreak of avian influenza either in birds or in humans. However, the capacity of many laboratories, although improving, is still relatively weak. The one saving grace is that, at this point in time, there is no evidence that the disease has entered our region, despite some of our very close neighbours having had outbreaks. The risk of it spreading to our region is therefore quite real.

With pandemic influenza, the real question we need to be asking is not whether it will come to the Pacific Islands region, but rather 'Is our region well prepared and ready to respond effectively if it does spread to our shores?' We cannot predict the future; we can only deduce through analysis of trends and sound reasoning what the possible scenarios might be. There is, however, one fact that we can all agree on – and that is 'If pandemic influenza spreads to any of our countries or territories in the region, the potential impact could be devastating.'

So, as professionals on whom our people rely for information and direction, what can we do to ensure they have the information they need if we are unfortunate enough to have avian or pandemic influenza outbreaks in our countries or territories? We cannot wait until there are enough trained animal and human health specialists, or all our laboratories are upgraded, or antiviral drugs and personal protective equipment arrive to see if our pandemic preparedness plans work.

First, we need to test our preparedness plans. If there are weaknesses in them, it is better that we discover them now, rather than when there is an outbreak, when the cost in both financial and human terms could be heavy.

Secondly, we need to get the message out to colleagues in the health and animal sectors and other sectors, and to communities. People need to know in simple terms what 'avian influenza' and 'influenza pandemic' mean, what effects they have, how they are spread, what they need to look out for, how they should respond if there is an outbreak, and how they can look after themselves during an outbreak.

Getting the message out is a challenge. However, the Pacific region has a culture based on communication networks, be they family networks, community networks, folklore or radio. They have existed and have been proven to work since way before the advent of the Internet. Electronic communication has increased our capacity to communicate, but has not replaced our more traditional networks. We need to use both. For many people in the region, the traditional network is possibly the only means that will reach them. Communities who know what bird flu is and are aware of the importance of preventing it and what their government will do to assist them have a far greater chance of successfully managing the disease and escaping the worst of it.

Thirdly, what should be the focus of our communication? As health workers, we have been reminded countless times of that old adage 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure'. Prevention is the key to avoiding the spread of bird flu in animals and in humans; containment is also vital. Neither prevention nor containment requires large numbers of technical specialists, laboratories or drugs. They require people who are prepared and who know what to do. The message has to get out in such a way that people understand and act on it.

Fourthly, we must be prepared. Our colleagues working in disaster management centres, law and justice, transport, communication, food security, border security, quarantine and immigration all need to know what they have to do. Business people, educators and civil society leaders – and most of all, our communities – need to know how an outbreak could affect them and the actions they will need to take.

Many of you will have worked with SPC's Pacific region pandemic influenza preparedness planning team. We work in this endeavour in collaboration with our key partners, including the World Health Organization and the Atlanta Centers for Disease Control. Our team at SPC now includes legal, communications, infection control and procurement specialists as well as animal and human health specialists, and they are working with all of our 22 island member countries and territories to assist in your efforts to be better prepared to respond to pandemic influenza. I urge you to take advantage of the expertise we bring to assist you in the best possible way with the development and testing of your whole-of-government plans.

In closing, it must be emphasised that a 'business as usual' approach is not the best modality in the region's preparedness efforts for influenza pandemics. Fighting avian influenza requires information, communication and thinking outside the box. Just as the virus can mutate, so our ways of doing business must change so that we can position our people, our countries and our territories in the best possible way to respond strategically and effectively to the threat of an influenza pandemic in our region.

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SPC