

Avian Flu Exercise: What Are They Doing?

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The early 2004 outbreak of avian flu in Asia was a catastrophe for Asian poultry farmers. There was also some risk of a human influenza pandemic, if the virus mutated to a form as dangerous as the H5N1 bird flu virus and as infectious as ordinary human flu.

The following quotations come from early 2004, when the issue was in doubt. For each quotation, try to identify which of our 25 recommendations the speaker is following or not following. Most are examples of several recommendations at once.

As you complete the exercise, notice that the good examples sound fairly normal ... as normal as the bad examples. Good crisis communication can feel wooden at first. But to the audience it sounds fine.

1. When World Health Organization spokesman Bob Dietz confirmed the good news that a Vietnamese woman's bird flu virus contained no human influenza genes, he said:
The results are encouraging, but unfortunately, they are still not the conclusive proof we need to fully discount the possibility of human-to-human transmission of the H5N1 virus.
2. Earlier in the Asian outbreaks, WHO's Peter Cordingley said:
If it latches onto the normal human flu virus, which is very contagious, then it could go around the world very quickly and cause widespread damage – many, many deaths.... This is a doomsday scenario which we hope is not going to happen, but WHO obviously has to take this very seriously ... because the flu virus is incredibly unstable and we don't know how to predict its movement.

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3. Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had denied rumors that bird flu had spread to Thailand. When he finally admitted the truth, he said:
It's not a big deal. If it's bird flu, it's bird flu. We can handle it.... There has been a lot of talk that the government has been trying to cover this up. That we didn't say anything doesn't mean we weren't working. We've been working very hard.... Please trust the government. It did not make an announcement in the very beginning because it did not want the public to panic.

4. Later, a senior Thai public health official said:
The first wave of the bird flu outbreak has passed ... but we don't know when the second wave will come, and we don't trust the situation.... So the Public Health Ministry is being as careful as possible.

5. When China's central government confirmed that Chaoan, in southern Guangdong province, had an avian flu outbreak, a senior Guangdong official denied it, saying:
According to whom is there an outbreak in Chaoan? The chickens could have died from car accidents or could have died from food poisoning.... Many farmers use excessive insect killers in their fields.

6. Discussing the potential for bird flu to combine with human flu and cause a pandemic, the chief of microbiology and parasitology at the University of the Philippines Medical School said:
We should worry. It kills. It kills.

7. As pneumonia patients in Vietnam started being tested for bird flu, Hanoi's hospitals were filling with patients. WHO's Bob Dietz explained:
This doesn't necessarily mean we are seeing more [bird flu] cases. They are being tested.... But this is not a valid indication of what is going on in the countryside. It is a very narrow window. The situation could be far worse elsewhere or it could be better.

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8. Bob Dietz again on the risk of human-to-human transmission:
Although we have seen no evidence of human-to-human transmission the next step would be for that to occur.... It is impossible to predict a time or date for this but there are mounting opportunities for the virus to alter its form and begin affecting the human population.

9. Although Singapore was still free of bird flu, the government announced a practice drill that would include the actual culling [killing] of 5,000 chickens. Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained that Singapore would:
...overreact rather than underreact.

10. Although India had no confirmed avian flu outbreaks so far, neighboring Pakistan had the disease. Rumors were widespread that India had it too. Chicken consumption plummeted, and some farmers decided to cull their own flocks. A government official said:
We might implement the state Prevention of Cruelty Against Animals Act against any poultry farmer who would kill large number of birds, which is capable of sending a wrong message to the people.

11. In the U.S., Delaware faced a simultaneous outbreak of a different avian flu virus. After it struck a second Delaware flock, Agriculture Secretary Michael Scuse said:
The source of the infection to the second farm is unknown at this time.... This development is completely unexpected given the precautions we took, the investigation we made and the industry's expectations of this disease's behavior. We will be taking immediate actions to contain this disease, but this is now a serious situation for the Delmarva poultry industry.

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12. Discussing the agonizing impossibility of quickly culling millions of chickens without compromising worker safety and humane treatment of animals, Hans Wagner of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization said:
There's such tremendous pressure to control the disease and slaughter as many birds as possible, some concessions are being made for the sake of speeding up the culling process.

13. When U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization officials in Vietnam reported that pig nasal swabs had revealed exposure (but not necessarily infection) to avian flu, Peter Roeder at FAO headquarters in Rome commented:
So what?... We've known for many years that these viruses infect pigs.... Let's just try and be a little bit rational about this.... Let's not be alarmist.... At this time we have seen no data that would indicate that pigs are in any way involved in spreading the current strain of H5N1 influenza virus.

14. After unconfirmed reports that several house cats had died of avian flu in Thailand, WHO's Dick Thompson said this would probably not pose a high risk of spread to humans, explaining:
It isn't the kind of animal we would be worried about as a mixing vessel – like we would be if we saw the infection in pigs, for instance.

15. Canada's Richard Schabas told the Canadian Broadcasting Company that WHO was over-reacting to a virus that had only infected 14 humans so far. He said paranoia was more pandemic than knowledge, adding:
We understand so little about real interaction between bird virus and human virus that we're not in a position to comment intelligently on the possibility of [human-to-human] transmission happening.

16. After a multinational Bangkok conference on the avian flu situation, WHO spokesman Peter Cordingley told the media:
Officials appeared shaken.

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Answers:

1. Acknowledge uncertainty; put reassuring information in subordinate clauses [good example].
2. Be willing to speculate; err on the alarming side; don't aim for zero fear [good example].
3. Don't over-reassure; aim for total candor and transparency; don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic [bad example].
4. Tell people what to expect; put reassuring information in subordinate clauses; acknowledge uncertainty [good example].
5. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths [bad example]. Note that this is also an example of speculating and letting official disagreement show – but the speculation is over-reassuring and the disagreement isn't respectful or credible.
6. Legitimate people's fears; don't aim for zero fear [good example].
7. Acknowledge uncertainty; tell people what to expect [good example].
8. Put reassuring information in subordinate clauses; tell people what to expect; acknowledge uncertainty [good example].
9. Err on the alarming side [good example].
10. Tolerate early over-reactions; don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic; don't ridicule the public's emotions [bad example].
11. Acknowledge uncertainty; acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; be explicit about "anchoring frames"; put reassuring information in subordinate clauses [good example].
12. Share dilemmas [good example].
13. Don't ridicule the public's emotions; acknowledge opinion diversity; put reassuring information in subordinate clauses [bad example].
14. Be careful with risk comparisons [good example].
15. Be willing to speculate; don't aim for zero fear [bad example].
16. Legitimize people's fears; establish your own humanity [good example].

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