

Bird Flu: The Media and Syndromic Surveillance

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OBJECTIVE

This paper explores how the mass media covered bird flu outbreaks overseas in the Fall of 2005, and the nation's preparations for a possible bird flu pandemic, and how this period of intense media activity affected sales of antivirals in New York City and New York State as monitored by syndromic surveillance techniques.

BACKGROUND

In the past, the media has served a source of data for syndromic surveillance of infectious disease, whether it is outbreaks of disease in animals or humans resulting in illness or death. More often than not, the reverse is true; data based on analyses of syndromic surveillance often flows from hospital to local health departments and federal governmental agencies such as the CDC to the media which then relays it to the public. In both instances, the media may serve as a purveyor of vital information. But, sometimes the media reports are less than ideal; the public may become fearful and panic at the news of a potential outbreak of an emerging infectious disease such as bird flu for which there is a high fatality case rate and no proven available vaccine, or curative therapy. Moreover, supplies of vaccine may be limited, and news of a shortage of antiviral medications such as Tamiflu may lead to stockpiling similar to what occurred with Cipro during the anthrax 'scare.'

METHODS

In the fall of 2005, a period of intense media coverage of bird flu, I analyzed two representative articles and one editorial which appeared in *Time* (10/17/2005), *Newsweek* (10/31/2005), and *US News and World Report* (11/14/2005), respectively, within the context of parameters set forth in papers published in peer-reviewed journals. [1-3] Parameters included: provision of specific health information to the public; whether the message was positivistic or negativistic; and, whether the message invoked fear or panic, or was calming and reassuring.

RESULTS

It was determined that over the period of one month, from October 2005 to November 2005, the abovementioned editorials and stories

shifted in tone from a sense of fear and confusion regarding the government's various policies to protect the public against bird flu to a more stable, positivistic one wherein a plan was presented by a high ranking DHHS official to show that 'something was being done.' A similar pattern had previously been observed in news reports and editorials published from 2002-2003 when the federal government presented its plan to vaccinate the populace (voluntary) and the military (mandatory) against smallpox. [4]

CONCLUSION

While stories in the media about flu bird may be ambiguous, because a pandemic is dependent upon an unknown strain of the flu virus which has yet to morph into a form that might wreak havoc in humans, they often contain specific vaccination and treatment protocols, with prioritization plans in the event of shortages of vaccine and/or antivirals. Thus, I believe that premature media reports on bird flu may not always serve the public well and has the potential to cause panic, and stockpiling of antivirals. As reported by Reuters (3/17/2006) which used data from the CDC [5], a correlation was made between the intense media coverage of bird flu outbreaks overseas in the fall of 2005, and a 'spike' in sales of antiviral medications such as Tamiflu which was higher than at any other time over the past 5 years, as documented by syndromic surveillance of Medicaid scrips (New York State Department of Health), and retail pharmacy sales (NYC DOHMH).

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