

UPDATE: Bird Flu, the Media and Syndromic Surveillance, 2006-7

Cynthia F. Racer, MA, MPH

Greater NY Chapter, Society for Public Health Education

OBJECTIVE

To ascertain whether mass media reportage of bird flu outbreaks during the moderate US flu season of 2006-7 influenced sales of antivirals in NYC and Upstate NY as monitored by syndromic surveillance[1], and to compare such data to that generated during the moderate flu season of 2005-06 following a period of intense media coverage in the Fall of 2005[2-3].

BACKGROUND

While mass media coverage of bird flu often provides specific information that may prevent or contain the disease, it is often less than ideal; the public may become fearful and panic at the news of a potential outbreak of bird flu which has a high fatality case rate of more than 60% with no available proven vaccine while supplies of antivirals may be in short supply. As reported by Reuters (3/17/2006) using data from the CDC [3], a correlation was made between the intense media coverage of bird flu outbreaks overseas in the Fall of '05, and a 'spike' in sales of Tamiflu which was higher than at any other time over the previous 5 years; documented by syndromic surveillance of Medicaid scrips (NYS DOH), and retail pharmacy sales (NYC DOHMH), authorities suspect the drug was stockpiled [3].

METHODS

I analyzed five representative articles on bird flu that appeared in the US mass media during the 2006-07 flu season within the context of four parameters [4-7], whether the message: 1) provided specific health information; 2) was positivistic or negativistic; 3) invoked fear or panic, or was calming and reassuring; and, 4) was mixed; both fear provoking *and* reassuring. I then compared the data to those derived from similar analysis of mass media coverage of bird flu during the US 2005-'06 flu season [2].

RESULTS

It was determined that over a period of almost 8 months, from October '06 to June '07, the following editorials and articles ran the gamut from 'reassuring' to 'fear- provoking' to 'mixed' messages. During the summer of 2006 the incidence of bird flu fell precipitously as did the number of articles in the mass media which were mainly reassuring [7]. *Newsweek* (10/30/06) reported that London's Hospital of Tropical Disease was focusing on how bird flu is spread,

while *US News & World Report* (12/01/06) announced a new and improved bird flu test. As 2006 came to an end, and into 2007, 'bird flu' came back with a vengeance surfacing in many more countries and proving especially deadly in Indonesia [7]. Media stories became fear- and panic- provoking; *TIME*, (3/20/07) reported on Japanese children committing suicide following treatment with Tamiflu, and on 3/29/07, reported on the Indonesian conflict with WHO over 'sharing' bird flu viruses needed for vaccines with *Newsweek* (5/10/07) covering a 'mysterious' outbreak of 'swine flu' in China. But, on 6/25/07, *TIME*, presented a mixed message, fear provoking, yet reassuring; Indonesian religious practices using chickens may pose a global danger of bird flu, but the US is funding an educational outreach.

CONCLUSION

The above observations are in contrast to the intense, mostly negativistic, and fear provoking mass media coverage of bird flu outbreaks in the Fall of '05 [2]; mass media coverage of the bird flu in the Fall of 2006 was less intense, and more 'reassuring', though it became more 'fear provoking' in March '07, the peak of the US flu season. Tamiflu, despite new restrictions, was widely prescribed in New York as reported by syndromic surveillance, but was not associated with stockpiling in 2006-07 [1]. This lends credence to the notion that the intense media coverage of bird flu in the Fall of '05, may well have been related to the stockpiling of antivirals 2005-'06 flu season [1,2]. However, more study is required to determine the degree to which the mass media influences sales of antivirals.

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- Further Information: Contact, Cynthia F. Racer, MA, MPH
Cyndi_genome2000@yahoo.com.