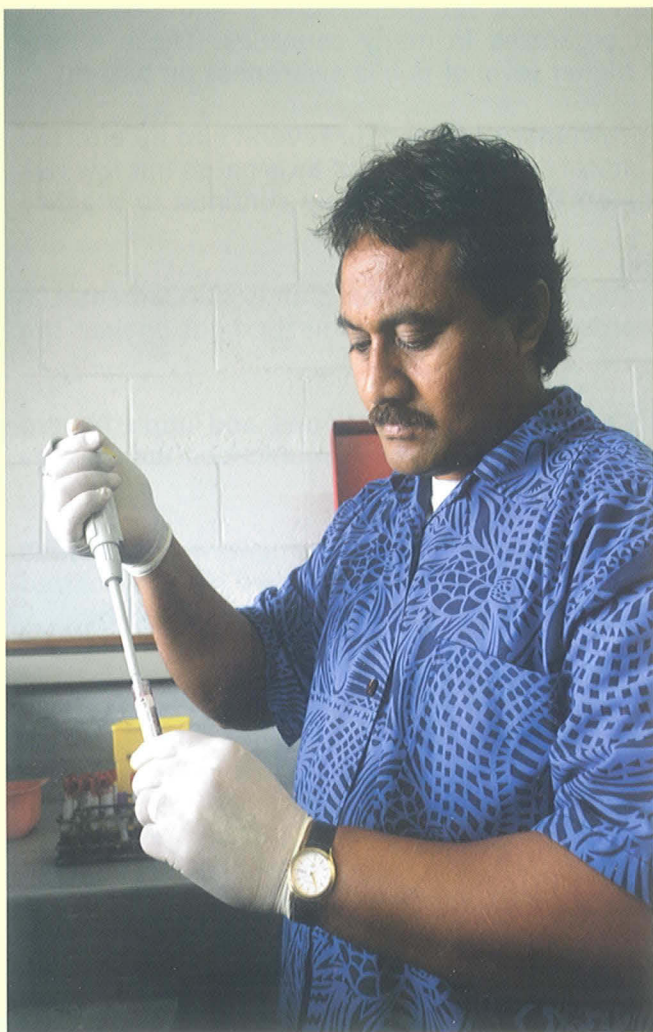


GLOBAL RESPONSE TO BIRD FLU (AVIAN INFLUENZA)



The bird flu virus is now endemic among wild birds and poultry in parts of Asia, and sporadic human infections from these birds continue to occur.

The virus has expanded its geographical reach to include new countries, increasing the size of the population at risk. Each new human case gives the virus an opportunity to adapt to humans, with the possibility that a strain may develop that is fully transmissible between humans. This in turn may lead to a pandemic, potentially with high numbers of illnesses and deaths worldwide.

To prevent a flu pandemic, it is vital to control the disease in birds and to prevent human infections. This is to reduce opportunities for animal-to-human transmission and to reduce the risk of emergence of a pandemic virus.

Concerted efforts and activities are being initiated by countries in coordinating international and national preparedness and response measures against bird flu.

Here are some of the highlights of the global response to bird flu.

- Many countries have stockpiled anti-viral drugs and other prevention equipment such as facial masks and gloves for their citizens, should a pandemic occur. Global pandemic surveillance and early warning systems have been strengthened to ensure that affected countries have all data and clinical specimens needed for an accurate risk assessment.
- Rapid containment operations have been intensified to prevent the bird flu virus from further strengthening itself and to delay its international spread. The other is the monitoring of flyways of migratory birds that can carry the virus.
- The governments, particularly in East and South East Asia countries, have culled millions of chicken and ducks to stop and reduce the spread of the virus among poultry and to reduce the risk of animal-to-human transmission. In some areas, it is now forbidden to keep backyard poultry.
- Mobilization of global and national media to encourage transparency in reporting and investigating bird flu occurrences.
- Scientific research and vaccine development for both poultry and humans to ensure that avian influenza and pandemic vaccines and anti-viral drugs will be rapidly and widely available.
- Collective action has been identified as a major means to ensure total protection against the spread of the bird flu virus. Various communication and social mobilization initiatives have been undertaken globally to inform and empower people to respond appropriately to a crisis.

The next section describes the role of communication and its importance in the bird flu prevention and preparedness context.



Communication response to bird flu

"Bird flu" is a complex disease which is spreading rapidly across the globe. This makes communication imperative in responding to its threat.

A variety of communication approaches involving advocacy, behaviour change communication and social mobilization for bird flu preparedness and prevention have been organized in many countries. These efforts result in a higher level of public awareness on bird flu.

However, preliminary research in several bird flu affected countries indicates a high level of awareness but low risk perceptions on the disease. People continue to practice

unsafe behaviours when handling poultry.

In response to this challenge, a comprehensive and strategic communication plan is fundamental to shift the behaviour of individuals and communities towards healthy practices in the fight against the deadly virus. Most importantly, it should start early.

Countries in South East Asia such as Indonesia and Cambodia have developed and implemented integrated National Communication Plans, which include a wide range of communication approaches to reach the vulnerable population.

Mass media materials such as television and radio spots as well as printed advertisements in newspapers have been launched. Networks of health workers, community and religious leaders are being mobilized to disseminate the key messages about bird flu prevention and preparedness at grass-root level.

In addition, effective and user-friendly training packages on bird flu prevention and preparedness have been created for frontline workers to disseminate key messages.

In other developments, governments have taken the lead role to create partnerships and develop as well as implement bird flu communication plans.

Even in regions where outbreaks of bird flu have not occurred, such as in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, governments are actively preparing for the fight against the deadly virus.

Governments together with civil society should join hands to prevent and prepare for this deadly disease.

