

October 2, 2006

Dear Members of the Campus Community:

As you know, avian influenza (subtype H5N1), also known as “bird flu”, is a hot topic in the media these days. Despite the fact that millions of birds, domestic and wild, have been culled (picked out), the infection has been persistent in the bird population and continues to spread along the flight paths of migratory birds. Most of the laboratory confirmed cases in humans have resulted from direct contact with infected birds with only a few cases occurring from human-to-human contact.

Scientists, public health authorities, and government officials have expressed concern that a pandemic could be sparked by the virus if it mutates in a way that allows for sustainable transmission from person to person. The World Health Organization and U.S. health authorities are making preparations in the event a pandemic occurs and has urged all communities to do so. We are following this recommendation and are making plans to prepare our campus community as well.

Hiram College has established a Pandemic Event Planning Committee in collaboration with the Portage County Health Department. The committee is developing an emergency response plan and in order to move plans into action will be contacting departments across campus to aid in the development of departmental plans. We are working to ensure that the college is prepared to respond by providing ongoing education about avian influenza and rehearsing emergency drills.

We are following the latest developments by monitoring the World Health Organization and Center for Disease Control and Prevention websites, following the guidelines of the American College Health Association, maintaining an open line of communication with our local health department and hospitals, and benchmarking the activities of other colleges and universities.

Finally, we realize that you may have many questions about avian influenza. To help answer some of those questions, we have prepared a pamphlet that will be distributed to each employee across campus as well as the following frequently asked questions and answers.

You can learn more about avian influenza and the pandemic threat at the following websites:

World Health Organization

www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza

Centers for Disease Control

www.cdc.gov/flu/avian

Department of Health and Human Services

<http://pandemicflu.gov>

If necessary, important updates and announcements will be distributed via the following communication tools: fax, e-mail, Hiram Web site or voicemail.

Rest assured that we are taking proactive measures to be prepared in case avian flu affects our campus community. If you have any other questions, please feel free to contact Sherry Swanson at the Health Center. Thank you for your attention.

Very truly yours,

Thomas V. Chema
President

Very truly yours,

Sherry Swanson, CPNP
Chair, Pandemic Event Planning Committee

Frequently Asked Questions About Influenza

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza, or “bird flu”, is a contagious viral disease that normally infects only birds and on occasion, pigs. A highly pathogenic strain, H5N1, has been persistent and tenacious. Despite the fact that an estimated 150 million birds have died or been destroyed, the virus has become endemic in some areas and is being spread by migratory birds.

What countries have been infected?

Outbreaks in wild and domestic birds have been reported in more than 40 countries including: the Republic of Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao Peoples Democratic Republic, Indonesia, China, Malaysia, Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and Romania.

What are the implications for human health?

Widespread persistence of H5N1 in poultry populations poses two main risks for human health. The first is the direct infection from poultry to humans. The second threat is the emergence of a mutant strain that spreads easily from person to person.

How is the virus transmitted?

The bird to human transmission occurs from direct contact with infected poultry or surfaces and objects contaminated by their feces. Exposure to the virus is most likely during slaughter, de-feathering, butchering, and preparing poultry for cooking. Currently, there is no evidence that properly cooked poultry or eggs are a source of infection.

What changes are needed for the H5N1 virus to affect humans and become pandemic?

The virus can become transmissible among humans by either a “reassortment” event or by a more gradual process of adaptive mutation.

In “reassortment” genetic material is exchanged between human and avian viruses when there is co-infection in a human or pig. This results in a new potent strain that is fully transmissible to humans. The process of adaptive mutation is a more gradual process by which the virus becomes more efficient at binding to human cells.

A pandemic can start when three conditions have been met: a new virus subtype emerges; it infects humans; and it spreads easily and is sustained among humans.

The first two conditions have been met in that a new subtype has emerged and humans have been infected through contact with infected birds.

Are vaccines and antivirals available for prevention and treatment?

Some vaccine clinical trials are currently underway. Because the antigen needs to closely match the pandemic virus, large-scale production will not start until the virus has emerged. Current vaccine production capacity cannot meet demand.

Tamiflu and Relenza are oral antivirals that are currently available and are effective for reducing the severity and duration of the illness. These medications can also be used prophylactically to decrease the number of new cases when an exposure has occurred.