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Swine Flu -

Marcellino D'Ambrosio, Ph.D.



Greetings folks,

When it comes to the Swine Flu, some people are blowing it off as nothing. Others are glued to the TV and bracing themselves for the worse.

So who do you believe?

Since I have a close personal friend who is a Ph.D. expert on viruses for the Center for Disease Control, I decided to give him a call and get his take on the swine flu outbreak. He is not an upper level administrator of the CDC, but a prominent enough researcher to have been interviewed on National television for his work on Lymes disease. We'll call him Dr. R. He prefers to remain anonymous since he makes a few comments about upper level government officials here!

Here's a summary of what he said on May 1st:

- Normal seasonal outbreaks of influenza kill about 35,000-40,000 people per year in the USA, usually elderly people. Any flu outbreak ought to met with common-sense precautions to cut down risk of infection and care for those infected.
- For a particular new strain of flu to qualify as especially dangerous, it has to satisfy two criteria: 1) that it is especially virulent, that is, that it kills a larger proportion of those infected than normal flu and 2) that it is especially easily transmitted from human to human. The killer Asian Bird Flu did not qualify as a pandemic because it met only 1 of these criteria – it killed about 10% of those infected, but it seems that most were infected through direct contact with live birds as opposed to being passed from human being to human being. It is not uncommon that viruses that originate in animals move less efficiently from person to person than from animal to animal or animal to person.
- It is impossible now and will remain impossible for several months to be able to make a scientific judgment whether either of these two criteria apply to this new swine virus. There just have not been enough cases reported and data collected. Anybody making "factual" statements on how dangerous this flu is basing the statements not on science but on hearsay and emotion.

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- The media has a vested interest in sensationalism and hype – it keeps people buying papers and watching TV which makes advertisers happy. Heads of government departments have a vested interest in being overly precautionary to cover their rear. If the outbreak were to get severe, they could be blamed for not doing enough. So it is helpful to keep this in mind when listening to the TV
- Being overly precautionary can be bad. In the 1970's a swine flu broke out in New Jersey. The government carried out widespread vaccination and the vaccine killed more people than the disease. Shutting down businesses and schools has significant educational and economic disadvantages. So common sense needs to prevail. 100 reported cases in the US does not warrant, in his opinion, canceling activities and closing schools
- The best measure to take would be for people to stay home when they are sick. Physicians, he says, are often the greatest offenders here. Washing your hands either with soap and water or with a hand sanitizer (both work well to kill viruses) and doing so frequently, especially when you are in frequent contact with people, also is important.
- He and the CDC staff receive the latest data each day. He promised to email me should hard data indicate that we ought to take more drastic precautions. And I promise to pass that news along to you immediately.

Hope you find this info helpful.

Stay healthy!
 Marcellino D'Ambrosio
 Friday, May 1, 2009

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