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SWINE FLU STRESS FEARS: FACT, FICTION & DÉJÀ VU

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Elevated stress levels due to economic woes have now been boosted further by fears of a dangerous epidemic of swine flu. The problem appeared to have started in Veracruz, Mexico, where pig farming is a major industry. Local residents had experienced an increase in flu and upper respiratory symptoms, but only a 5-year-old boy who became ill on April 2 was tested. He was later found to have what was thought to be swine flu. By then, he and all the others were completely recovered, but the disease had started to spread to several neighboring regions. Concerns were heightened by the death of a 39-year-old female on April 13 in Oaxaca, 150 miles to the south.

Also Included In This Issue

She was a door-to door collector of tax information who recently returned from Veracruz, where she had been in close contact with over 300 people. She was admitted to the hospital five days earlier due to severe respiratory distress that was not responsive to antibiotics. It was suspected that she was suffering from SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) due to a coronavirus, but test results that were reported a few days after her death proved to be negative.

Subsequent testing revealed she had the same virus as the boy from Veracruz. By May 1, there were 8 confirmed and up to 170 suspected flu deaths in Mexico, and the virus had spread to 11 U.S. States and 7 other countries, including New Zealand and Israel.

Dire predictions from authorities here and abroad warned of an impending disaster similar to the 1918 flu pandemic that killed 75-100 million people within 18 months. Many now feel that much of what the public learned about this and other Doomsday scenarios was shaped by the media in an effort to publicize eye catching and sensational headlines that would increase their readership, rather than a careful analysis of the facts. In some instances, dangers may have also been hyped by vested interests eager to profit from the situation, as well as governmental and other agencies that possibly overreacted to protect their posteriors by avoiding any criticism or blame.

Is It Likely That A Deadly Swine Flu Epidemic Is Imminent?

The possibility that swine flu had spread to other countries was raised on April 26, when the U.S., Nova Scotia and British Columbia reported a total of 24 cases, primarily in students and others who had visited Mexico. The following day, the World Health Organization (WHO) upped its pandemic alert level to Phase four, which meant that a worldwide epidemic was now a distinct possibility. As more cases were reported over the next 24 hours, it promptly raised the alert to Phase five, indicating that a global epidemic was now imminent, or about to occur at any moment. This was the first time that Phase 4 or Phase 5 had ever been declared since the warning system had been introduced in 2005 as a result of the avian flu crisis. **WHO Director-General Margaret Chan's warning that "All humanity is threatened", coupled with the fact that the level of danger had increased twice in two days, sent shock waves around the world.**

The U.S. response was also exaggerated, and at times, somewhat theatrical. The first case here was a 10-year-old boy with a fever and cough who had a throat swab taken at a San Diego clinic in March during a random check procedure routinely used to monitor illness around the U.S.-Mexico border. Tests revealed the presence of a virus that didn't match any other known flu subtype, and the CDC (Centers For Disease Control) subsequently determined that it was a new influenza strain they labeled A/H1N1. The second case was a 9-year-old girl in a neighboring county with similar symptoms on March 28; her cousin had fallen ill three days earlier, as did her brother on April 1. The CDC confirmed on April 17 that the girl also had the same new strain found in Mexico. By then, all these children had also made uneventful recoveries within a few days. None had traveled to Mexico or had any close contact with Mexicans, much less pigs. Researchers suggested that the virus had been spreading around border regions during the winter flu season with few symptoms, and then evolved into a more serious form with fever and cough. **It might actually have spread to Mexico from the U.S. and had mistakenly been labeled "swine flu" because tests showed that many of its components were similar to influenza viruses found in American pigs.** However, a subsequent and

more detailed analysis revealed that it was very different, since it had genes from flu viruses found in pigs in Europe and Asia, as well as others from avian and human flu genes. **It was not the same virus that caused the 1976 swine flu scare and has never been isolated in pigs.**

On April 28, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger declared a swine flu state of emergency in California to coordinate activities and obtain Federal funds for assistance because of continuing high Mexican border traffic both ways. Two schools in the Sacramento area had been closed because of suspected swine flu and by the first week of May, several hundred schools in other states were shut down for a week for similar reasons, including an entire school district of over 80,000 students in Fort Worth, Texas. Vice President Biden urged everybody to avoid public transportation whenever possible, handshaking at commencement exercises was discontinued, some colleges canceled graduation rites as well as athletic events, Harvard Medical School suspended classes and 39 Marines were quarantined in a barrack because one had suspicious symptoms. Several archdioceses did away with drinking wine from a communal chalice as well as hand shaking at mass, and some masses were suspended. In many instances, these actions were taken because someone was suspected of having swine flu or it was believed this would stop its spread. But the average age of those with confirmed swine flu was 17, and most teens with a week off from school congregated in malls or movie theaters, where contagion was even more likely. Face masks, hand sanitizers and antiviral drugs like Tamiflu and Relenza quickly sold out, even though it is well established that none of these provide any significant protection or treatment benefits. In a prime time televised news conference, President Obama said he would ask Congress to authorize an immediate $1.5 billion to stockpile additional drugs and take other corrective measures, and was very careful to refer to it as an H1N1, rather than swine flu virus.

Physicians and already crowded Emergency Rooms were overwhelmed by people concerned that any sniffle or cough might indicate that they had this new and potentially deadly disease. A seventh grader, whose mother insisted he wear a face mask to school to prevent catching swine flu, was sent home and the school was closed down. A United Airlines flight carrying 261 passengers from Germany to Washington, D.C. was diverted to Boston, where it was boarded by a medical team that detained it for eight hours until tests on a 53-year-old woman, who was wearing a face mask to keep others from catching her cold, proved negative. At least 16 countries banned importing pork products from the U.S., and Russia rejected all meat (including beef and poultry), although there was no evidence of infection in U.S. pigs and the disease could not be transmitted by eating pork or meat.

The situation was much worse in Mexico, where all schools had already been closed nationwide until at least May 6. The May 1 Labor Day and *Cinco de Mayo* May 5 national holiday celebrations were canceled and the President urged everyone to stay home for at least five days. Mexico City, the second largest metropolitan area in the world, noted for its traffic jams and busy bustling crowds, looked more like a ghost town. Almost all businesses and government services were shut down due to a presidential decree that permitted only hospitals, transportation, supermarkets and certain "essential services" to stay open for its 20 million residents. There was nothing to attract the usual tens of thousands of daily visitors or tourists. In some neighborhoods, sidewalks usually packed with outside diners, were empty, and "Takeout Service Only" placards were plastered on the doors of the few restaurants that were still open. Exports not only of pork, but meat and poultry stopped and even non-food products made in Mexico fell off sharply. The $13 billion a year tourist industry, which had already been suffering from drug trafficking concerns and hurricane damage, evaporated. Europeans as well as North Americans were told to avoid travel to Mexico unless essential, the largest tour operators in Germany and Japan canceled all trips to Mexico, and cruise lines skipped all Mexican ports. In addition to Mexico City, Cancun, Acapulco and other vacation destination airports were empty because of numerous discontinued flights, especially from the U.S. Occupancy rates at hotels, usually around 90 percent or higher for this time of the year, dropped to 20 percent, and the staff had little to do except wash their hands every half-hour in between trying to sanitize the doorknobs and metal railings. In Cancun, where hotels and restaurants depend on daily air freight shipments of foods, existing supplies rapidly ran out. Estimates were that swine flu was costing the Mexican economy $1 billion a week, and the value of the peso began to plummet against U.S. and foreign currencies.

Pandemic Panic, Confusion, The "Blame Game" And Media Hype

Other parts of the world were also caught up in swine flu hysteria. Egyptian authorities ordered all of the 300,000 pigs in the country destroyed as part of a prophylactic public health measure, despite the fact that no cases had been reported in humans or animals, the disease cannot be contracted from eating pork, and it is not spread by pigs, but people. In at least one instance, a pig farmer too poor to own a radio or TV knew nothing about the decree until police and health officials arrived at his house early in the morning and threatened to arrest him if he did not surrender his animals. Since half of the family's annual income comes from the sale of their small herd of 25 pigs, he resisted, but finally yielded after being beaten on the head and legs several times. The government also sent a health worker to inoculate all 14 members of the family against swine flu. A Cabinet spokesman initially suggested that farmers would be reimbursed for each

slaughtered pig, but the Minister of Agriculture subsequently ruled that this would not apply if farmers were allowed to sell the pork from fit animals.

The problem was that when farmers brought their pigs to slaughterhouses, they were actually charged for this service. **The only thing they received in return was a package of meat for which there was no market, and which had to be kept frozen.** One farmer explained that it would be impossible to salvage the meat by slaughtering and freezing his herd of swine at once, as the government decreed, since "We only sell two or three at a time at the request of the butcher." Muslims are forbidden to eat pork, and most pig farmers are poor Coptic Christian scrap merchants that raise their animals by feeding them organic refuse, and sell some to other Christians to make ends meet. Slaughterhouses could not keep up with the demand and riots broke out when the government announced plans to import three machines to raise their capacity to 3,000 pigs a day. In one Cairo suburb, Egyptian police and armored cars spraying tear gas charged into a crowd of a thousand irate pig farmers who had blocked the road leading to their pig pens armed only with stones and bottles. Some 200 policemen then surrounded the neighborhood, backed by a half dozen police trucks, causing over a dozen injuries and 14 arrests. Smaller but more violent outbursts with injuries that required hospitalization also erupted in other areas. This uproar has continued despite WHO protests that slaughtering pigs was worthless in preventing the new H1N1 flu virus, and **emphasized that calling it swine flu was misleading and inaccurate.**

Three dozen passengers and two crew members on an American Airlines flight from L.A. to Tokyo were quarantined for eight hours because of their proximity to someone suspected of suffering from swine flu, until tests proved negative. The only confirmed case in China was in a Mexican tourist with minimal symptoms who recovered in three days. Nevertheless, officials quarantined 300 healthy guests for a week, since they had been in the same hotel during his stay. Others, who were on the same flight to Shanghai as the 25-year-old flu victim, were also rounded up, including a family of five with three small children. They had gone on to Beijing, where they were awakened in the early morning and whisked to an infectious disease hospital, where, according to their father, an AeroMexico executive, "they were isolated in a room with bloodstained sheets and what appeared to be mucus smeared on the walls". They were later transferred to a hotel where they were quarantined along with other Mexican nationals. Flights to China from the U.S. and Canada were boarded by health officials wearing white protective suits, masks and rubber gloves, who quickly removed and isolated anyone with a Mexican passport. Many were quarantined even though they had not lived in or visited Mexico for over a year and had no flu symptoms. In at least one instance, Mexico's ambassador to China and his staff were

not permitted to visit or even speak by telephone to several hundred quarantined at a hotel. A group of 29 Montreal students and a professor were also quarantined at a hotel in northeastern China when they arrived on May 2, although none had any contact with Mexicans or were ill.

Canadian and Mexican officials were indignant, if not infuriated. A Foreign Affairs spokesman in Ottawa said the Canadian Embassy in Beijing was sending a diplomatic note to the Chinese Foreign Ministry to "request an explanation for the decision to place the students under medical surveillance. At this time, we are not aware of any medical risk factors that would have supported the decision. We will also voice our deep concern about officials being denied full access to the hotel where the students are quarantined, in order to provide full consular assistance." Canada also indicated that it would pursue World Trade Organization sanctions against China if it maintains its ban on Canadian pork and hogs. Mexico's foreign minister said its citizens with no signs of infection had been isolated in "unacceptable conditions", that such measures were "discriminatory and ungrounded" and that his government is advising its citizens to stay away from China. Argentina, Peru, Ecuador and Cuba were also criticized for suspending flights from Mexico against WHO recommendations. An Aeromexico plane was subsequently sent to Shanghai to repatriate dozens of Mexicans being held under forced flu quarantine. Since China had discontinued all direct flights to and from Mexico, the Chinese charted a plane to return its citizens who were now stranded in Mexico.

Mexico strongly objected to media coverage of the crisis, especially the Associated Press, which described Mexico City as "the epicenter of the outbreak", making it sound as if a nuclear bomb had gone off. It was also referred to as "Mexican Flu", prompting officials to claim that **the virus came from Asia. The governor of Veracruz was quoted as saying the virus specifically came from China,** which led to angry denials, and likely contributed to China's harsh treatment of Mexican nationals. Dr. Miguel Lezana, Mexico's chief epidemiologist, told the Associated Press that the virus might actually have come from South Asia. One of the first swine flu deaths was a Bangladeshi who had lived in Mexico for six months, and had recently been visited by a brother with flu symptoms who arrived from Bangladesh or Pakistan. He also criticized the World Health Organization for its delay in reporting the problem. He had alerted its Pan American branch on April 16 about an unusually late seasonal outbreak of flu and pneumonia cases. While WHO headquarters are normally alerted immediately about any such suspicious event, it took several days before the message reached Geneva. Mexico has no sophisticated viral testing facility, and it was not until April 24, eight days later, when U.S. and Canadian labs first identified the Mexican cases as swine flu, that WHO suddenly announced that it was

"very, very concerned" about the threat of a pandemic. They soon raised the pandemic threat level to Phase 4 and a day or so later, Phase 5, which had never been done before. In a May 4 interview, WHO chief Margaret Chan said that the highest Phase 6 pandemic warning could be expected in a day or two, meaning that a global epidemic was now in full force. Since she wanted to avoid "unnecessary panic", she tried to reassure reporters by adding that this was "not the end of the world."

Many people did not know what a pandemic was, and for some, it evoked visions of black-plague carts being hauled through streets piled high with dead bodies. Few understood that a pandemic is simply an epidemic that is not isolated, but has spread to other geographical areas to different degrees. There is no implication that a phase 6 is necessarily associated with increased deaths, although fear-mongers were always careful to suggest that millions of people could and probably would die, as in the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. (The vast majority of those deaths were due not to the flu, but streptococcal and other bacterial infections for which effective antibiotics are now available.) Mexico health authorities had been criticized for their slow response to the epidemic and how they handled the 1985 massive earthquake, especially when Mexico City was rocked by a 5.7 Richter scale event on April 27. The complete shutdown of the capital for a week may have been an overreaction to these charges. However, Dr. Lezana placed the blame on WHO and called for an investigation of Dr. Margaret Chan. She was elected WHO director-general in 2006 after four rounds of voting because of strong backing and lobbying by the People's Republic of China. Many consider that her reaction to the swine flu problem was exaggerated not only because WHO's initial response was delayed more than a week, but also to avoid the severe criticism of how she handled the 2002 SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic when she was Hong Kong's chief health official. SARS exploded in Hong Kong in 2002, but Chan and Chinese authorities denied the existence of an epidemic until April 2003. By then, the virus had spread to more than 30 countries and caused over 700 deaths, including 300 in Hong Kong. It possible that the harsh restrictions China placed on Mexican visitors may also have been motivated by fears that they would again be castigated for dragging their heels.

There was no shortage of blame and criticism here during the first few days after the swine flu scare was officially recognized. Democrats and their allies heeded White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel's maxim that "you never want a serious crisis to go to waste." President Obama used the flu scare to emphasize the need to fund scientific research, noting "our capacity to deal with a public health challenge of this sort rests heavily on the work of our scientific and medical community." Republicans spent most of their time trying to immunize themselves from blame. Many complained that

Congressional Democrats had removed $900 million set aside for pandemic flu from this year's stimulus bill. This would have been the final installment of President George W. Bush's request for $7 billion in federal spending for vaccines, medical equipment and planning. The last funding provided for such purposes was $600 million in 2006 to be spent over two years. It was quickly exhausted, and state and local health agencies were now so strapped for cash that they had to cut other services. The executive director of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials warned that the current system "is lining up to decrease resources at the time we need them most."

The political right and left offered varied conspiracy theories about where this new strain originated. On the far right, Rush Limbaugh stated emphatically, "All of this is by design. It's designed to get people to respond to government orders. ... It is designed to expand the role and power of government and schools, and the media just falls right in line with it." Michael Savage, another radio talk show host claimed, "There is certainly the possibility that our dear friends in the Middle East cooked this up in a laboratory somewhere in a cave and brought it to Mexico knowing that our incompetent government would not protect us from this epidemic because of our open-border policies." The far left was even more sordid. They suggested that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was in collusion with big pharmaceutical vaccine manufacturers to produce a new mixed virus strain that would cause a pandemic, in order to boost their profits, as well as increase CDC funding for tests to deal with the problem.

Face Masks, Hand Sanitizers, Tamiflu, Relenza And Swine Flu Vaccines

WHO and governmental agencies have also been criticized for being unrealistic about the efficacy of their recommendations for prevention and treatment. Everyone knows that it is important to cover your face when you sneeze or cough to avoid spreading a cold, flu or other respiratory infection. However, those blue and other loose fitting surgical face masks are of little value in this regard. Nor do they protect you from getting infected, since viruses can pass through and around them. and droplet infections can still gain access to the body through the eyes. Although both WHO and the CDC admit that the masks are ineffective, and may give a false sense of security, the Mexican government has distributed 6 million and most suppliers have run out of stock and cannot keep up with demand. As a result, some people are making their own or purchasing fancy designed but markedly inferior products from street vendors or the Internet. To prevent inhaling most virus-bearing droplets from a cough or sneeze, masks should fit tightly over your nose and mouth, with no gaps, must be worn as long as you're in a risky environment and replaced after each use, or at least twice daily. They should be rated NIOSH (N95) or higher and can usually be found in the

painting section of hardware stores. However, these, and especially other masks, can actually spread the flu if they are not disposed of properly.

Hand washing is important but must be done vigorously for at least 20 seconds in soap and hot water every half hour or so to be effective. When this was not feasible, many resorted to hand sanitizers, which also quickly sold out and are of little value unless they have an alcohol content of at least 60 percent. This can kill bacteria, but not viruses, and since protection is temporary, repeated applications are required. This can be dangerous for children, especially if they lick their hands, and numerous cases of alcohol poisoning have been reported when products are ingested. Numerous hand and furniture sanitizer products claiming to kill the swine flu and other viruses are vigorously promoted by various web sites, but are also worthless. SOAPOPULAR, a UK non-alcoholic sanitizer, may be an exception.

Perhaps the biggest rip-off are antiviral drugs like Tamiflu and Relenza. Tamiflu is approved only for treatment of uncomplicated influenza A and B in very young children, and for prevention of influenza in people 13 years or older. Swine flu is extremely convenient for governments that would very soon have had to dispose of billions of dollars of Tamiflu stockpiles purchased to counter avian and seasonal flu. In October, 2005, the US ordered 20 million doses, costing $2 billion and the UK ordered 14.6 million doses. The shelf life of Tamiflu had already been increased to 36 months in 2002, and in an unprecedented move, the European Union just announced that it was extending this an additional three years. After U.S. Homeland Security declared a swine flu health emergency, about 12 million treatment doses of Tamiflu and Relenza were released from our stockpiles. The FDA also announced that under the Health Emergency Use Act, it was suspending its usual good manufacturing procedure protection requirements to monitor Tamiflu production and storage. Relenza was not included since it is administered by nasal inhalation. Tamiflu's "Use By" date was also extended because of evidence that some benefits could persist for up to seven years. These rulings permit possibly ineffective doses to be administered to children, despite the fact that Tamiflu has significant safety problems in this age group. Serious side effects in children and teens include convulsions, delirium or delusions, with 14 confirmed deaths due to these problems and brain infections, which led Japan to ban Tamiflu for children in 2007. The two dozen side effects of Tamiflu include: nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headache, dizziness, fatigue and cough, some of the flu symptoms people are trying to avoid. Tamiflu also puts some influenza patients at higher risk for secondary bacterial infections, the major cause of the massive number of deaths during the 1918 flu pandemic. So why would anyone want to take a drug costing well over $100 that can have significant side effects, increase risk of other infections, and is potentially lethal?

According to official data, when Tamiflu is used as directed (twice daily for 5 days) it can only reduce the duration of flu symptoms for a maximum of 36 hours. Many drug stores sold out of Tamiflu, but it is very easily obtained on the web. All that is required is to fill out a form checking off some symptoms, indicate that you have seen a physician, and send it along with a check for $150 plus shipping and handling. This is shipped out promptly after allegedly having been reviewed by a physician, although nobody ever attempts to verify the information. The wholesale price for ten pills is $25.00, but most sites want you to buy 30 pills for $300 or more. Some Canadian sites actually advertise "No prescription necessary!" Others are less expensive but there is no guarantee that what you receive contains the drug even though the packaging looks identical. A very recent report indicates evidence of growing resistance to Tamiflu that could render it ineffective for treating swine, as well as avian and seasonal flu. What is of particular concern is that resistance to the H1N1 serotype has been reported in patients who had not taken Tamiflu. In addition, even if a new specific H1N1 or other flu drug or vaccine is developed, it seems highly unlikely that there will be enough time for it to be adequately tested in clinical trials to determine either safety or effectiveness. As will be seen, during the 1976 swine flu disaster, the vaccine that was created, and all U.S. citizens were strongly advised to take, killed dozens and disabled over 500, while the alleged epidemic fizzled out. To add insult to injury, even if a new vaccine turns out to be dangerous or harmful, the pharmaceutical companies responsible are now immune from any lawsuits for injury, including death.

Numerous Internet sites like swineflurelief.com and swineflusafe.com, have suddenly popped up selling products that claim to diagnose, prevent or cure swine flu. Over 146 domains referring to the epidemic were registered over the last weekend in April and "Swine flu" rose to the top of Yahoo and other search engines inquiries, surpassing American Idol for the first time. Keywords and phrases such as "swine flu symptoms", "swine flu cure" and "swine flu pandemic" increased more than 40 fold on Google, and similar posts on Twitter quickly passed 10,000 an hour. Federal officials were so concerned that in addition to its CDC, FDA, and other sites supplying updated information, it launched pandemicflu.gov to report abuses. One website, http://rebuildermedical.com was publicly declared to be a fraud because it was selling a "$199 SilverCure Swine Flu Protection Pack" consisting of shampoo, lotion, conditioner and soap containing silver. Since the FDA had not approved any silver product to treat swine flu, these are considered illegal claims that must be corrected within 48 hours of notification to avoid prosecution. Other sites sell dietary supplements, foods or other worthless products claiming to be drugs, vaccines or devices that can prevent or cure swine flu. Some that advertise "FDA-approved" medical masks and gloves have also been making false claims about their efficacy.

Unfortunately the FDA does not have the manpower or resources to monitor and police these numerous and nefarious practices, and in most instances, minor changes in verbiage will allow them to continue, so "buyer beware."

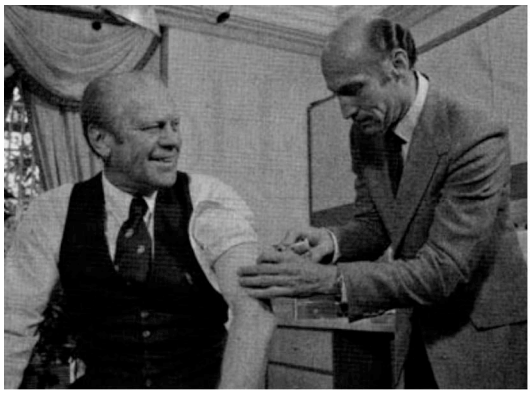
Putting Flu Epidemics In Their Proper Perspective And Proportions

As an old saying goes, "Those who do not learn the mistakes of history are doomed to repeat them." This is hardly the first time that we have been threatened by or subjected to an infectious disease epidemic nor will it be the last. What is important is to determine if we can profit from prior events such as the 1918 Spanish flu, when some of the millions that died felt well in the morning, became ill by noon, and died in the evening or next day. As previously noted, this was not due to flu, but superimposed streptococcal of other bacterial infections for which there was no treatment. That virus first surfaced in a mild form in the spring, waned during the summer, and then returned with a deadly vengeance in the fall. Unlike seasonal flu that tends to infect and kill the elderly, this flu was more apt to infect and kill children, teens and young adults. Since those who contracted the spring virus were rarely affected, it seemed likely that they had developed some protective immunity. This new H1N1 virus that is one of its descendants, shows a similar age pattern and there are concerns it could also mutate into a more lethal version later this year. As a result, some believe that it might be advisable not to close schools and public events to encourage more exposure to the virus. Others suggest that swine flu parties to contract infection might be preferable to avoiding it. Chickenpox parties, where kids get together in close contact so they can all be infected by someone with a mild case, are often held by parents who fear chickenpox vaccine. Others want their children to have the stronger immunity that a known infection provides, and are willing to take the risk that there will be no serious complications.

Influenza epidemics are always considered to be more severe than they usually turn out to be, since attention is focused on those with severe signs, symptoms and deaths rather than the multitudes with mild complaints and no complications. As in the previous swine flu epidemic, this may result in an exaggerated response that does more harm than good. That disaster started in February, 1976, when an Army recruit at Fort Dix, N.J., died from a virus thought to be similar to the lethal 1918 strain, that was then commonly referred to as swine flu. (This was because two cases of humans infected with swine influenza viruses had previously been reported that were also similar to the 1918 strain. Both had close contact with pigs but there was no evidence of transmission to other people.) Several soldiers at the base also became ill, and subsequent serologic studies revealed that some 200 soldiers at Fort Dix were now infected with the identical strain, suggesting a high rate of person-to-person transmission. Shortly thereafter,

two patients with the same strain were reported in Virginia, raising fears that spread to other states that could kill millions was imminent.

Mindful of the 1918 epidemic, multiple high level meetings were held that resulted in adding the new virus to the vaccine being manufactured for the 1976–1977 influenza season. The $137 million program began with a media blitz urging everyone to take the new improved vaccine that included photos of President Ford getting his and long lines of others waiting to receive it.



Beginning in early October, more than 40 million Americans, almost 25% of the population, received the swine flu vaccine until the program was halted on December 16, after only 10 weeks. Shortly after it started, 3 elderly people at one clinic died soon after receiving the vaccine, and a few cases of crippling Guillain-Barré syndrome, a rare neurological disease were reported. These and other complaints were initially dismissed as coincidental, since there was no proof that the vaccine was responsible. However, as more and more cases of this paralyzing and sometimes deadly disease surfaced, a possible, if not likely, relationship could not be denied, and the program was discontinued. Two months later, Federal officials announced they would resume immunizing high-risk people with the original monovalent seasonal flu vaccine, and the director of the CDC was dismissed. It was later revealed that over 500 people were believed to have developed Guillain-Barré syndrome after receiving the vaccine, and there were 25 deaths. Several healthy young adults suffered permanent paralysis, including paraplegia. With respect to the swine flu epidemic that was predicted to kill millions, only 200 cases and one death were ultimately reported in the U.S.

Many are concerned since there are plans to develop a new H1N1 vaccine to be added to or given along with the seasonal vaccine to be administered later this year. It was later found that meningococcal, polio and HPV vaccines like Gardasil are also associated with Guillain-Barré syndrome and it seems doubtful that there will be enough time to adequately test any new vaccine for safety, much less efficacy. With respect to priorities, seasonal flu affects over 30 million and causes 36,0000 deaths each year. The two U.S.

H1N1 deaths to date have been in people with health problems. **There are 100,000 deaths daily from hunger related diseases, but no alarms go off until the "haves" feel threatened.** In regard to predictions, President Bush proposed a $7.1 billion budget in 2005 to prevent "a bird flu epidemic that could kill an estimated 2 million Americans." This epidemic also never materialized. Only 257 people have died from bird flu worldwide since late 2003, with none in the U.S. As revealed in the 2006 best seller, *The Bird Flu Hoax*, the President's prediction was based on projections from self-serving sources. Their purpose was to create a level of alarm and fear that would enrich certain groups and companies by millions of dollars.

None of the above should be misinterpreted as suggesting that a serious H1N1 epidemic will not occur. Nobody knows whether the current mild version will fizzle out or recur in a more dangerous version. It is rather a warning that media coverage and predictions need to be carefully evaluated based on the facts and what we have learned from the past. The predilection for young people and relative absence in patients with HIV and compromised immune systems suggest that severe symptoms may stem from hyperactive immune responses. Recommendations for prevention and treatment should be taken with a grain of salt since they are often hyped and may lead to a false sense of security. (The latest is an intranasal statin said to be superior to Tamiflu.) What is safe and may be effective, is to take 4,000 to 8,000 i.u. of vitamin D3 daily, since this has been shown to prevent or significantly curtail flu symptoms. In a 2006 report of patients in a psychiatric ward receiving only 2,000 i.u. of vitamin D3 daily as part of a another study, all were completely spared from the influenza epidemic that year, whereas numerous patients in adjacent wards became ill from the flu. A recent National Health and Nutrition Survey similarly concluded that higher vitamin D blood levels showed a direct correlation with fewer respiratory infections. Over 75 percent of Americans are vitamin D deficient, and many report that adequate supplementation prevents their usual winter colds, coughs and runny noses. – Stay tuned for more news about other vitamin D3 triumphs!

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