Avian Flu: Is It Real?

By: Anisa Abeytia

"It is very easy to blame wild birds and the migratory birds because nobody is responsible. It is possible that wild birds may introduce the virus, but it is through human activities of commerce and trade that the disease spreads"

-Juan Lubroth Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, January 2006

I look forward to the spring when the calls of migratory birds fill the air and their various "V" formations mark the skies like floating scarves. This seasonal event fills me with awe and joy, but this year I was a bit apprehensive about their return and asked myself, "Are they carrying avian flu?" It seemed to be a valid concern considering the extensive news coverage lavished on it. Yet, as a person interested in holistic methods of healing, I knew that my fear might be unfounded.

Dr. Joseph Mercola, an eminent medical doctor, placed my fear in perspective by saying, "you probably have a much better chance of wining the lottery than dying from the proposed avian flu epidemic." Avian flu, also know by the influenza strain it belongs to, H5N1, first emerged in Hong Kong in 1997. Since that time, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), 200 human cases were confirmed and less then 100 deaths resulted (Grain, 13). More people die world wide from diarrhea. Yet, does this mean that there should be no concern or that bird flu does not pose a serious danger? Is the WHO wrong in asserting that potentially millions of people could die due to a flu pandemic? The threat is real, but the media, governments and public health organizations are pointing the finger in the wrong direction. It is this lack of action to curb the true disseminators of avian flu that posses a threat to world health.

How Disease Spreads

In the various documents produced by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), WHO and FAO, no where do they discuss the basic concept of how diseases spread.

This is very relevant because the story these agencies are pushing seems to be a slight of hand because it ignores basic virology.

The official stance is that wild and migratory birds serve as a natural reservoir for the various strains of avian flu (there are hundreds, Highly Pathogenic (HP)H5N1, being of concern). These wild birds then mix with backyard chickens to create an atmosphere that causes amplification (generating enough viruses) for it to mutate into something that can jump species-like to humans. The ability of H5N1 to jump to domesticated animals, then be transmitted to humans and then be transmittable from person to person is what has everyone concerned. It is true that avian flu naturally resides in migratory birds and then mixes with backyard poultry, but the strains produced are not pathogenic. Figure 1.1 illustrates the pandemic disease cycle.

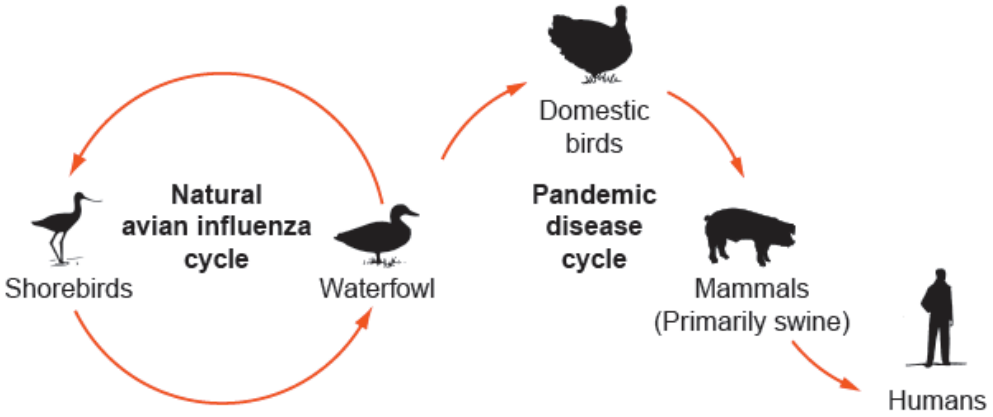

Figure 1.1 Global cycles of avian influenza viruses in animals.
Source: *Field Manual of Wildlife Disease: Birds*

Avian flu is not a new disease. Similar to humans, birds experience a flu season. Typically avian flu is "an inapparent or non clinical viral infection of wild birds," meaning it usually does not causes death (USGS). It typically does not cause death because it is not highly pathogenic. Fortunately, via normal circumstances the contact of wild birds and backyard poultry do not provide enough genetic material for the virus to mutate. Instead of acting like "mixing bowls for the constant circulation of the disease," small farms maintain genetic diversity and safeguard world poultry, as well as human health (Grain 3,11). Also, according to BirdLife, the outbreak pattern

does not follow the migratory fly ways of birds. BirdLife's Dr. Richard Thomas states that these outbreaks follow major roads and railways. (BirdLife)

In the case of Newcastle disease, a now endemic poultry virus, it was proven in Australia that it was an endemic form of the disease that was introduced into a factory farm and then mutated into a virulent form. The Australian authorities did not act by blaming backyard chickens because "all the available evidence indicates that, for such a mutation to occur, it needs a large number of birds in a small area . . . In simple terms, a small number of birds cannot generate enough virus for the mutation process." (Domenech).

In Asia, the epicenter of the disease, these small farms maintain small flocks, usually cared for by women, of a few birds per family. This scattered, free-range approach to chicken production impedes the FAO's ability to implement their program of culling and vaccination which is their only two sources of controlling avian flu. The FAO failed to seek out other, more plausible containment strategies and missed the point. If this scenario were the case, Laos, who's locally raised, free-range poultry supplies 90% of the country's needs, would be expected to be over run with avian flu, but it is not.

Laos: The Exception to the Rule

Laos is a neighbor to the two countries with the highest incidents of both bird and human cases of avian flu. The figures for humans in Vietnam were 90 cases, 40 deaths and in Thailand there were 17 cases, 12 deaths from January 2004 to August 2005 (WHO, 13). Laos has had 42 confirmed poultry outbreaks, 38 in the large industrial center of Vientiane. The smallholders whose flocks were infected with the virus were located near "commercial operations suffering from the disease" (Grain 8). Laos does not have a large scale poultry industry outside the large commercial operation located in Vientiane. More importantly, unlike its neighbors, "there is almost no contact between small-scale poultry farms . . . .and its commercial operations" which are run by foreign interests (USDA). Laos ended the epidemic by closing its boarders to chicken from Thailand and culling the infected chickens. Thus

far, there are no confirmed human cases of avian flu in Laos. So why did ending trade with Thailand in poultry end the epidemic?

Roads of Transmission

Poultry manure is a primary residual source of virus (avian) for domestic flocks. The virus has been recovered from poultry houses more that 100 days after flock depopulation for markets.
-Field Manual of Wildlife Diseases: Birds, 184.

Charoen Pokphand (CP) is a Thai company and Asian's largest manufacture of poultry and poultry feed (which is in part made with poultry litter, or what ever is left on the floor of the chicken coop). In Cambodia in 2004, authorities linked an avian flu outbreak to day-old-chicks supplied by CP. In Burma, an outbreak was also linked to chicks from CP as well as to outbreaks in Laos who used feed imported from Thailand. A CP farm in Vietnam also was contaminated with avian flu in 2004. China's avian flu infested Lanzhou province was also linked to CP and it is believed that it was waste found in chicken feed that infected the wild birds in the Qinghai Lake region (BirdLife). In Turkey, Hastavuk Company, a CP subsidiary was linked to the human outbreak there (Grain 11-12). When the local population was interviewed they said that the factory sent out trucks filled with low-value birds to sell to the poor farmers. It is a common practice to dump infested birds into the poor surrounding communities to make a quick profit. One such truck was sent out with such birds a few weeks before the human outbreak in Eastern Turkey. However, CP is not the only culprit. This problem is systematic.

It is in the overcrowded and filthy conditions of factory farms where H5N1 amplifies due to the cramped and overpopulated conditions. The demand for meat in urban Asian cities drives the push to factory farming. Yet despite the enormity of the industry, poultry farming is left to monitor itself. It is believed that since these operations are contained that they are "bio-secure." Even high-tech factories in Japan fell prey to contamination of avian flu. The reckless attitude and unsanitary practices should be proof enough to governments who should begin to set into place strict regulations and standards on the poultry industry to safeguard human health and stave off a potentially devastating flu pandemic.

Medical Terrorism

In fact, if the viral/bacterial theories were accurate (or complete) then one would assume that no nurse or physician on earth would survive, as such people are constantly exposed to every conceivable form of virulent microbe, yet seldom fall ill.

-Hakim GM Chishti, ND, *The Traditional Healer's Handbook,* 19

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) offers Tamiflu as the solution to the avian flu. First, Tamiflu only works if taken within the first 18 hours of infection. Also, it poses a greater threat if taken at a low dosage, which is a real possibility because there is a Tamiflu shortage.

Tamiflu is not without hazards. It contains several toxins such as mercury, aluminum and formaldehyde. Worse still, Dr. Harold Buttram states that flu shots diminish immunity in children and adults and it does not always combat the flu because it only can fight one strain of the flu and there are hundreds. Does this sound like the cure to what ails? As Dr. Mercola points out, the CDC is not an agency that promotes health. They fail to mention the role of diet and exercise as keys to staying healthy.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, as former head of Gilead who holds the patent for Tamiflu, and as a major share holder will make a huge profit. So will the poultry industry giants who will further gobble up local resources in the Third World and use the avian flu as an excuse to push poor farmers out of a livelihood for a disease that the poultry industry is responsible for.

Anisa Abeytia lives in Northern California with her husband and four children and is a member of the Islamic Writer's Alliance. She is pursuing her M.S. in Holistic Nutrition and maintains the website www.womenshealingscircle.org. She is dedicated to the physical, mental and spiritual health of the Muslim Ummah. Anisa can be reached at anisa@womenshealingcircle.org.

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