

FACING THE THREAT OF AN INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

When the last major influenza pandemic struck in 1918, the massive movement of troops across the Atlantic at the end of the First World War helped transmit the deadly Spanish flu far and wide.

Today, with tens of thousands of people jetting around the world each day, it's likely that a new influenza pandemic would spread with even greater ease.

While the H5N1 avian flu virus remains largely a danger to birds, with only a few hundred human cases caused by direct exposure to infected birds, the possibility of a human influenza pandemic exists if the avian flu virus mutates or combines to form a new human strain. Staff of DFAIT, both at home and in missions abroad, have been preparing to handle diplomatic, consular and trade issues that might arise in a pandemic, and to ensure that accurate information about the disease is relayed and essential services are provided.

"With its international focus, this department is taking contingency plans for a possible outbreak of pandemic influenza very seriously," says Ruth Archibald, the senior coordinator for pandemic preparedness at DFAIT. Foreign missions have detailed plans for all potential pandemic phases that could be declared by the World Health Organization (WHO), Archibald says,

and the department has recently developed a plan for its headquarters staff.

Romania's announcement in March of a quarantine related to an outbreak of the H5N1 flu virus in Cernavoda, a town of 20,000 people southeast of Bucharest, might not have drawn much attention, except that some 250 Canadian workers and their families were living there temporarily while working for Atomic Energy of Canada Limited. Staff of Canada's embassy in Bucharest kept abreast of the Canadian workers' situation until the quarantine was lifted.

Howard Njoo, Associate Director General of the Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response at the Public Health Agency of Canada, says it's expected that between 15 and 35 percent of the population would become infected during the course of a human influenza pandemic—some seriously, others less so.

One of the first international effects of a pandemic would likely be travel restrictions. Njoo says that, as a control measure, seriously affected countries would start screening people leaving their borders to see whether they had any symptoms of the flu. "What you are really trying to do is slow down the spread of the virus so that you gain time



to develop a vaccine," he says.

In a document entitled *Responding to the Avian Influenza Pandemic Threat: Recommended Strategic Actions*, the WHO notes that "countries with pandemic response plans, ideally rehearsed in advance, will be in the best position to make decisions and take actions rapidly."

Managers at DFAIT have conducted "tabletop" planning exercises with missions in Beijing and London to develop and test response strategies in the event of a pandemic, and have identified the critical services that will continue to be offered.

"Essential staff will be available, but you are not going to have the same level of service," says Archibald, whose great-uncle died of the Spanish flu, having returned to Canada after fighting in the First World War.

Scott Corcoran, Deputy Director of emergency planning in the Consular Affairs Bureau at DFAIT, says Canada's foreign embassies and consulates do not provide medical services to Canadian travellers, although they can provide information on where to seek help.

Some 2.5 million Canadians live, work or are travelling abroad at any given time.

For further information on pandemic influenza preparation visit www.influenza.ca.

Information for travellers is at www.fac-aec.gc.ca/avianflu-en.asp.

A researcher analyzes the carcass of a dead duck in Brescia, Italy, for signs of the avian flu virus as part of control measures introduced in Italy.

Canada hosts international AIDS conference

The XVI International AIDS Conference will be held in Toronto from August 13 to 18. The theme of the high-profile event is "Time to Deliver," focusing on the promises and progress made in the global fight against HIV/AIDS. This is expected to be the largest of the biennial conferences to date, with more than 20,000 delegates from the scientific community, civil society organizations and academic institutions, as well as political leaders, government officials

and international dignitaries. The Government of Canada is a strong supporter of the conference, contributing over \$4 million to the event and organizing several conference sessions including a leadership forum. Canada has invested more than \$800 million over the past five years to deal with HIV/AIDS around the world and is committed to an evidence-based approach to combatting the disease that promotes human rights, gender equality and partnerships with civil society. More information on the conference is at www.AIDS2006.org.