

Talking risk: avian flu advice from a risk communicator

Peter Sandman, a risk communicator who has worked with HHS about how the government might communicate the risk of a human flu pandemic, talked to *Food Chemical News* about how policy makers and industry should tell the public about the bird side of the issue.

FCN: What are the most important messages the government should be delivering when it comes to avian influenza?

Sandman: In my judgment, there are lots of things the government ought to say. I've been watching what country after country have been saying before and after [an H5N1 outbreak]. They all make the same mistakes. It's been very frustrating.

FCN: So what should they be saying?

Sandman: The single most important thing to say is that there are two illnesses. We have confused them by calling them both bird flu. Bird flu is a disease in birds. Quite separate from that, there is the fear that H5N1 could either mutate or re-assort and learn to pass easily, rather than with difficulty, from birds to humans. If that happened, it wouldn't be bird flu anymore.

So when we get H5N1 in the U.S., it will be bad news for birds, but the odds of any human being getting it are very, very, very small. We know we're going to get it in birds, and the poultry industry is worried and rightly so. But the rest of us shouldn't care about an occasional H5N1 bird any more than we should care about an occasional BSE-positive cow. That's the only way to tell people to stop worrying so much about the birds.

The other half of the message is that our risk of a pandemic doesn't depend on whether birds get H5N1. If the virus learns to transmit from people to people, it won't be spread by migratory birds, it will be by migratory people. Let's suppose H5N1 learns human-to-human transmission in Vietnam. A farmer gives it to his wife who gives it to the neighbors who give it to the store keepers who give it to the hospital workers who freak out and come to the U.S. Pretty soon, it will spread like any other flu and then will have nothing to do with birds.

FCN: What mistakes have other countries made in their messages before avian flu hit?

Sandman: Countries have started out by saying, "We're safe because our birds don't have bird flu."

Then it hits and now we're not safe. They give a stupid reason for being safe, then when the stupid reason stops being true, people feel at risk. People think 'For six months, you've been telling us we're safe because we don't have bird flu. Now we don't believe you.'

FCN: What do you think of the U.S. government and industry repeatedly telling the public that you can't get avian influenza by properly handled or cooked food?

Sandman: It's a laugh line. How many people get *Salmonella* every year? Food is routinely cooked improperly.

FCN: How can government and industry avoid a drop in poultry sales after an avian flu finding?

Sandman: There's no way, in my judgment, to get people through the early weeks of a bird flu crisis without a pause in their chicken eating. The question isn't how do we keep it from happening. It's how do we make it milder or shorter? How do we have 9/11 without making people afraid of airplanes? This is called an adjustment reaction. It's a normal thing people do.

Officials should understand that people may be nervous about eating chicken, even though the science is clear: it takes really bad luck and really intimate contact to get bird flu, and your chances of getting it are about as good as winning the lottery while you're hugging a chicken. And it's impossible to get if your only contact with a bird is one that's cooked to death.

But none of that will be important [at first]. Everybody with an imagination is put off chicken for a while. They hear about it, and go out for dinner and chicken is on the menu. Right next to it is hamburger and fish, and they like those too. They'll think, 'Tell me all the science you want, I've just watched all these birds being culled [on TV].'

FCN: So how do government and industry make the adjustment reaction milder and shorter?

Sandman: The adjustment is milder and shorter if you respect it rather than be contemptuous of it. While the risk is low, they need to express understanding and support for the normal inevitable tendency to back off the stigmatized food for a while.

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