

Bird Flu: Communicating the Risk

by Peter M. Sandman and Jody Lanard

Health authorities want to spread the word that avian influenza has brought the world perilously close to a new flu pandemic. But raising awareness about uncertain threats can itself be perilous. Two leading risk communication experts offer advice on how to sound the alarm.



Poultry await sale at a livestock market in Indonesia. More than 140 million birds have died or been destroyed in the Asian bird flu epidemic. Estimates of potential deaths from an eventual human pandemic range from 2 million to nearly 100 million. (FAO photo)

Public health officials have a pandemic-size communication problem. Experts believe a deadly influenza pandemic is quite likely to be launched by the H5N1 avian virus that has killed millions of birds and dozens of people in Asia. They are more anxious than they have been in decades. But infectious diseases are unpredictable. H5N1 could disappear—as swine flu did in 1976—and "The Great Pandemic of 2___" could arise from a strain that doesn't even exist yet. Even if H5N1 does cause a human pandemic, it might weaken and produce only mild disease. So it's hard for officials to know how aggressively to sound the alarm. They don't want to be accused of needlessly frightening the public. They also don't want to be accused—later—of leaving the public underprepared for a disaster.

Communication wouldn't be such a problem if it were possible to get ready for the next pandemic without talking to the public. It isn't. Health authorities want the public to be aware of this grave threat for three fundamental reasons: so people will prepare