

*****STATEMENT//INTERVIEWS: LEADING GLOBAL EXPERTS COMMENT ON INCREASINGLY CONCERNING BIRD FLU SPREAD IN THE US--AND BEYOND*****

Avian flu virus in cattle highlights urgent need for ramped up efforts to prevent spillover of viruses from animals to people

Statement by experts from Preventing Pandemics at the Source on global implications of bird flu's spread

Following the spread of a highly contagious bird flu (H5N1) to cows--and now detected in milk--in the United States, experts made the following comments about parallels to the COVID-19 pandemic and laid out suggestions for an immediate action plan for how to prevent the further spread of the disease.

Dr. Nigel Sizer, Executive Director of Preventing Pandemics at the Source (PPATS) said:

“Recent revelations of the extent of bird flu virus infections in poultry and cattle in the United States highlight that policymakers have again taken their eyes off the ball in efforts to protect humanity from new pandemics. Experts are deeply concerned that this virus, which is spreading in many other species, could evolve to become transmissible between humans. This is deeply frustrating so soon after COVID-19, which resulted in around 20 million lives lost, not to mention the devastating impact of mpox more recently – both diseases likely the result of spillover of viruses from wildlife to humans.

“In this case it is hard not to point the finger at lax monitoring and regulation of animal agriculture in the United States and elsewhere. Improved animal husbandry conditions, more rigorous inspection standards, as well as better reporting and sharing of animal health information could reduce the risk of these outbreaks as well as improve the welfare of the animals we consume. **We must question for how much longer consumers will have to worry that the price of a cheap sausage or steak is the risk of another global pandemic.**

“This news also lands as governments struggle to muster the leadership and political will to negotiate a global accord on pandemic prevention under the auspices of the World Health Organization in Geneva. The current text and ongoing disagreements between governments in those negotiations, which will end in May, strongly indicate that the new funding, partnerships, and cooperation so desperately needed to prevent and respond to outbreaks of new diseases will continue to be elusive.”

Experts from the *Lancet*-PPATS Commission on Prevention of Viral Spillover added the following comments:

Dr Dirk Pfeiffer, Chow Tak Fung Professor of One Health at City University of Hong Kong, and Professor of Veterinary Epidemiology at the Royal Veterinary College, London, said:

“These incidents are yet another example of nature sending us a warning that we have 'screwed up' when it comes to looking after our planet. Sadly, despite all the other warning signs such as climate change, biodiversity loss and the COVID-19 pandemic, we are still not acting with the urgency that is required. One key goal has to be the transformation of global food production systems towards sustainability. There is still a widespread philosophy of aiming for maximum profit in meat production, when it should be about optimizing food security, food safety, animal welfare and ecological sustainability. In that context, global investors who see opportunities in making money out of meat production should be aware that 'growing cattle, pigs or chickens' is not the same as making parts for mobile telephones. And that is because we are dealing with biological entities that are capable of amplifying pathogens as well as being sentient beings.”

Dr. Robyn Alders, Honorary Professor (Development Policy Centre and Institute for Climate, Energy and Disaster Solutions) Australian National University; and Dept of Pathobiology and Population Sciences, Royal Veterinary College, UK; and Senior Consulting Fellow, Chatham House Global Health Program:

“The identification of the new strain of bird flu in dairy cattle shortly after confirmation that it was found in dead birds and mammals in the Antarctic region is a graphic illustration of its wide dissemination and continued evolution. We know the influenza virus well and understand how easily it can be transmitted, including via mechanical spread. A collaborative approach to data and resource sharing is essential to enable the effective prevention and control of all influenza subtypes across all species. We must also demonstrate to decision makers that strategic, systems-based control of influenza in animals will reduce pandemic risk, while also contributing to improved food safety and security as well as biodiversity and ecosystem benefits.”

Dr. Malik Peiris, Professor of Virology at the School of Public Health at The University of Hong Kong, and a leading global expert on the H5N1 virus said:

“The spread of this strain of bird flu illustrates the scale of the threats posed by novel emerging viral infections on wildlife such as marine mammals, domestic livestock, zoonotic and potential pandemic threats to humans. This outbreak highlights the need for One Health approaches for preventing spillovers and interventions to reduce risk of such threats ‘at source’.”

Dr. Chris Walzer, Executive Director Health at the Wildlife Conservation Society, said:

“The situation with avian influenza across the United States exemplifies the inherent hypocrisy and vested economic interests around Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness, and Response as one hundred ninety-four member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) are negotiating perceived responsibilities and equity around a new Pathogen Access and Benefits-Sharing Mechanism—while the Global North is demanding transparent and rapid access to pathogen data from the Global South to

develop diagnostics, vaccines, and therapeutics, it seems unwilling to share such information with the world.”

Additional expert comments.

Dr. Thomas Mettenleiter, German biologist and virologist, previous head of the Friedrich Loeffler Institute, the German Federal Research Institute for Animal Health, and former co-chair of the One Health High-Level Advisory Panel for the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN, the UN Environmental Program and the World Organization for Animal Health:

“The panzootic of HPAI H5N1 demonstrates how fast influenza viruses can change and adapt. From a mere sporadic appearance, HPAI has become enzootic in poultry and wild birds with an unprecedented global spread. The repeated spillovers to mammals, including humans, document its continuous evolution of adaptations to new hosts. Influenza viruses have caused major devastating pandemics before, so we have to take this very seriously and do all in our power to reduce the likelihood of spillovers at source. “

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Please visit the PPATS website at: <https://www.preventingfuturepandemics.org>