Avian influenza: assessing the pandemic threat
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Influenza pandemics are associated with high morbidity, excess mortality, and social and economic disruption. There were three such pandemics in the twentieth century: in 1918, 1957, and 1968. During 2004, the world moved closer to a further pandemic than it has been at any time since 1968.

In the past, pandemics have announced themselves with a sudden explosion of cases which took the world by surprise. This time, we have been given a clear warning. During 2004, large parts of Asia experienced unprecedented outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza, caused by the H5N1 virus, in poultry. The virus crossed the species barrier to infect humans, with a high rate of mortality. Monitoring of the evolving situation, coordinated by WHO, has produced many signs that a pandemic may be imminent. This time, the world has an opportunity to defend itself against a virus with pandemic potential before it strikes.

Preparedness for a pandemic presents a dilemma: what priority should be given to an unpredictable but potentially catastrophic event, when many existing and urgent health needs remain unmet? In such a situation, it is useful to put together all the known facts that can help us to see where we stand, what can happen, and what must be done. That is the purpose of this publication.

The H5N1 virus has given us not only a clear warning but time to enhance preparedness. During 2004, concern about the threat of a pandemic set in motion a number of activities, coordinated by WHO, that are leaving the world better prepared for the next pandemic, whenever it occurs and whichever virus causes it. Nonetheless, our highly mobile and interconnected world remains extremely vulnerable. No one can say whether the present situation will turn out to be another narrow escape or the prelude to the first pandemic of the 21st century. Should the latter event occur, we must not be caught unprepared.
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