

How a Little-Known Science Can Protect You From Bird Flu

You can use a little-known branch of science to help protect yourself and your loved ones from the bird flu pandemic.

It's called evolutionary epidemiology. Basically, it means that microorganisms evolve in ways that encourage the survival and spread of their species.

How this works in each human disease, depends on the nature of how the disease spreads.

The common cold irritates but does not kill us -- so we feel well enough to go to work and sneeze and cough on other people, thus spreading the virus. Malaria is a killer because sick malarial patients allow more mosquitoes to suck up their blood and then infect other people.

There's currently a scientific debate going on about what this means in connection with bird flu.

Some scientists say that bird flu will not evolve into a highly contagious killer such as the 1918 virus because there is no World War I going on in Europe. Trench warfare conditions made that flu evolve into a fast killer, because the fast transmission of diseases causes them to evolve into virulent forms.

Other scientists say that the A/H5N1 virus could still mutate or re-assort into a highly contagious and highly mortal killer of people, even without a brutal war to encourage such evolution.

As the recent author of a book telling people how to protect themselves and their families from bird flu, I worried that maybe the first camp are right and I was wasting people's time.

Then I realized something -- my book was perfectly in tune with evolutionary principles.

It's true that there's no world war raging in Europe, but so far, I have not seen anybody in this debate bring up the subject of megacities in the developing world. Mexico City, Jakarta, Bangkok, Calcutta . . . and more are intensely crowded with humanity. Whole extended families sleeping together on floors of corrugated iron.

These overcrowded megacities are home to millions of people around the world. If bird flu spreads into one of these neighborhoods, it will find many victims.

They will not seek medical treatment, because they can't afford it. They will lie down at home -- which means being in close contact not only with the many family members they live with, but all the neighbors who stop in and visit. They do not have separate bedrooms or even beds. So they will just have to lay in a corner and struggle for breath.

It seems quite logical to me that in such areas, bird flu could rapidly evolve into a killer flu on a par with 1918, in accord with evolutionary biology principles.

The clear call to action from evolutionary epidemiologists is therefore that isolating victims encourages microorganisms to evolve into nondangerous forms.

If we could isolate everybody in mosquito areas behind solid walls and screened windows, we would force malaria, yellow fever and dengue to evolve into mild forms.

If we could provide everybody in the world with safe drinking water we would force cholera to evolve into a mild form.

If we could force every drug user to give up needles and everybody to give up all but one lifetime sexual partner, HIV would have to become more benign.

I have always recommended that during a bird flu pandemic everyone isolate themselves and family members as much as possible. That's the flip side of isolating victims. As much as possible, bird flu patients should be isolated from non-infected people.

And during a pandemic when large numbers of people will be infected? Non-infected people should isolate themselves.

I advise to do that for personal protection, but if everybody isolated themselves, then A/H5N1 would have to evolve into a much less lethal flu virus.

However, we cannot wait for that eventual evolution to save us. It did happen to the 1918 flu, but not before wiping out whole Eskimos villages near the Arctic Circle -- far from the European war.

Once bird flu becomes both highly contagious and highly lethal, it will eventually change -- I've never believed it would wipe out all humanity.

But you don't want to be one of the millions who do die while waiting for bird flu to evolve into a "nice" virus.

Resolve to isolate yourself and your family if necessary -- and all other ways to fight bird flu.

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