

Avian influenza. Is there an Islamic solution?

To the Editor

We read with great interest Saeed and Hussein's leading article 'Avian influenza' published in the May issue of the journal.¹ We believe it is a timely endeavor by our Saudi colleagues to assist others to review the topic. As of 8th May, 2006, this deadly virus has afflicted 9 countries; 5 of those are Muslim countries, and Iraq, which has already been affected abuts border with Saudi Arabia. No wonder a virus so adept at crossing the species barrier will be able to cross Saudi border to enter the country. Supposedly, both natives and pilgrims alike would be affected.

Saudi Arabia as the custodian of the holy cities admits over 2.5 million Muslims every year during pilgrimage season and millions more throughout the year gathering on minor pilgrimage (Umrah). Hypothetically, Hajj may play as an epicenter of a global epidemic if the virus gains the ability to transmit among humans. Some other major outbreaks have originated at Hajj, global epidemic of meningococcal W135 following Hajj in recent years is an example of the pandemic potential of Hajj.²

Unlike SARS, traditional quarantine by segregating suspected individuals with the contagion is very unlikely to help; as the H5N1 virus is spread through inhalation or self-inoculation onto the respiratory tract of large and medium sized droplets, and droplet nuclei arising from birds, their excreta, saliva and other secretions, not through human breaths.¹ Culling poultry and gunning down wild birds from the sky will require huge manpower and is not a practically feasible solution. The lack of a specific bird-flu vaccine and the soaring resistance to antiviral drugs persuades us to think of other alternatives. The quarantine method made known by the Prophet of Islam (peace be on him, PBH) to contain the plague may be of tremendous help in this situation. The plague can be compared to avian influenza because of its zoonotic origin, short incubation period, high mortality, and pandemic potential. As the Prophet (PBH) said in an answer to his followers on the plague, "So if you hear of its spread in a land, don't approach it, and if a plague should appear in a land where you are present, then don't leave that land in order to run away from it (i.e. plague),"³ absolute prevention can be assured only by suspending human mobility to and from the affected area. This 'Islamic quarantine', as we may call it, will not only save an unaffected community from exposure to infected individuals but also from

exposure to contaminated environmental surfaces where an influenza virus can withstand drying and survive for up to a fortnight. In 'Islamic quarantine' prevention is focused at a community whereas in modern day quarantine it is focused at an infected or suspected person; hence in the former, residents of a community are encouraged to stay within its boundary in order to prevent external spread of a disease.

Furthermore, basic sanitation taught by Islam can make a difference to provide protection at a personal level. Good hand washing does more to prevent influenza than anything else. Mandatory hand washing before prayers 5 times a day, and after "clearly delineated tasks: before and after meals; after visiting the lavatory; after touching a dog, a cadaver, or one's shoes; and after handling anything soiled or in some way suspect"⁴ can supplement personal hygiene aimed at preventing bird-flu.

Islam forbids dead poultry; that safeguards oneself from handling dead fowls dying of bird-flu. Pigs too are forbidden in Islam. They have plenty in their respiratory tracts receptors for avian as well as human viruses to bind with, enabling them to act as mixing 'vessel' to re assort a novel strain.^{1,5} A devoted Muslim is not expected to come in contact with pigs or piggeries frequently and long enough to allow viral exchanges.

Islamic hygienic measures are simple and easy to follow, and could be complementary to other contingency preparedness plans to prevent pandemic influenza.

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Reply from the Author

No reply was received from the Author.

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