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Communities warned to prepare for bird flu outbreak

It's coming, expert says. He advises not to depend on federal, state help.

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By Jeff Cox
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Americans better get ready to deal with the near -certainty of some type of an avian flu outbreak domestically, according to a Lehigh Valley infectious disease expert.

"It is only a matter of a headline away until we hear about avian flu inside the United States, first in birds, then a human case," said Dr. Luther Rhodes III, chief of infectious diseases for Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network. "Then what do we do?"

The virus is passed to humans who eat infected animals and is found largely in countries where livestock are fed other diseased animals. Americans are less likely to get the flu because of more stringent federal regulations on what livestock can be fed, according to experts.

But that's far from a certainty, and area health professionals want to be ready if and when avian flu hits. Rhodes believes preparation will be the key to containing the spread of bird flu.

Mobilization efforts similar to the mass drive-through flu vaccines LVH provided in recent months will be one way the area can protect itself, he said. Getting the right information to the right people is another way, he said.

Rhodes said individual communities will have to rely on themselves, rather than wait to be rescued by state or federal authorities.

"The thing we can do is be sure we have a clear understanding locally of how we would distribute a vaccine and not get ourselves in a (Hurricane) Katrina -like thing where we'd be waiting for somebody to come riding down (Interstate) 78 and save us," he said. "Being prepared locally is what makes the difference between chaos and confusion and a successful outcome."

Avian flu has yet to reach U.S. shores, but worry over potential outbreaks has been reported elsewhere in North America.

Eight farms in Quebec were quarantined late last week over fears that imported ducks and unhatched eggs from France, which recently underwent its own bird flu scare, might carry the virus. Canadian health officials stressed the move was precautionary, but the decision reflected a growing international concern over an avian flu pandemic.

A local economics expert warns world markets could be crippled should the flu begin to spread between nations and reach the United States.

"The very worst that could happen is something like one in eight people in the Lehigh Valley could die of the flu. That's pretty bad," said Stephen Snyder, assistant professor of economics at Lehigh University. "That is unlikely to happen. But could 1 or 2 percent of all the people in the Lehigh Valley die of the flu? Yes, that could happen. That would be an enormous catastrophe."

Snyder said health officials must be prepared to get flu vaccine and antibiotics, such as Tamiflu, to those areas of the world that need it most, and to health care professionals so they can function in hospital settings. Limiting the spread of the virus, rather than eliminating it, is a more practical place to focus, Snyder said.

Both men said finding a place to treat those infected in the case of a massive outbreak would be a critical undertaking.

Rhodes points to joint local efforts at combating bioterrorism as a model to stem an avian flu outbreak. LVH partners with St. Luke's Hospital in Fountain Hill and Sacred Heart Hospital in Allentown in that effort, which will be extended to the anti-bird flu effort.

"Seasonal flu is enough to cause ERs to go on divert on a regular basis. That's very telling," Rhodes said. "That's every bit as telling as a pre-Katrina cracked levy."

"What we're trying to do at Lehigh Valley Hospital is partner with the National Guard to have rapid construction on short notice of additional screening and management facilities."

The ability to mobilize quickly, he added, will be critical to the Lehigh Valley avoiding mass paralysis the likes of which happened to Toronto during the SARS outbreak of 2003.

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