

## Editorial

### Pandemic: how to avoid panic?

The *tsunami* that took place on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2004 in the Indian Ocean and hurricane Katrina, that last August struck the Mexican Gulf, are two recent natural events that turned into catastrophes for mankind, causing several thousands victims. One of the reasons behind this can be traced back to the fact that useful information in the hands of scientists and experts did not reach the right people within the right time.

A crushing defeat for risk communication was witnessed in these two recent events. All the more paradoxical since we live in what we like to name “the era of communication and information”. Needless to say, it is not enough just to denounce such mistakes: they have also to be avoided in the future. Global emergencies are unfortunately offering us new challenges. Among the most important and complex ones is the Avian influenza and the risk – a significant one, according to epidemiologists – that the H5N1 virus, responsible for an aggressive infection in birds, might become the agent of a pandemic. Such a pandemic might infect hundreds of millions of human beings and even kill some millions of them, just like the 1918-1919 Spanish Flu.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and many national governments are preparing specific emergency plans to face the “worst possible scenario”. Doctors and pharmaceutical companies have been mobilized. Work is already in progress to produce vaccines and antiviral drugs, isolate suspect epidemic breeding grounds, organize molecular biology laboratories in order to “understand” the virus and hospitals in order to clinically fight it.

But there is still a question to answer: should the epidemic burst, how can we avoid panic and resist the temptation to adopt a “God for all and each for his own” attitude? It is an urgent question, even more so since we know our chances of fighting the pandemic are limited: the infection spreads rapidly in a large portion of the inhabited world; the reserves of vaccines and antiviral drugs are insufficient; it is consequently necessary to prioritize among the social groups which will have access to protection systems.

Given the situation and the lack of a proper mass preparation, avoiding panic and resisting the temptation to adopt the “each for his own” attitude will be difficult, as said before. We would then have to deal with two major problems, each worsening the other: the mobility of the virus and social chaos.

How can the second emergency be avoided, then? The WHO is aware of the problem and its proposed solution is: “As soon as a pandemic is declared, health authorities will need to start a continuous process of risk communication to the public”.<sup>1</sup>

The WHO justly maintains that health authorities must develop a risk communication strategy, in order to avoid panic and behaviour that might worsen the pandemic, at any level (global, national, regional or local). This strategy must include both the formation of those who will have to manage the communication during emergency situations and the inclusion of communication experts in the so-called senior management teams, i.e. the top groups which will have to manage the crisis.

Despite this clear indication and the warnings embodied by the *tsunami* of the Indian Ocean and hurricane Katrina in the Mexican Gulf, even emergency plans elaborated by the countries that take the problems of the avian influenza most seriously lack a solid public risk communication strategy. In these conditions, there is - yet again - a serious risk that scientists and technicians do acquire information that might prevent a natural phenomenon (the appearance of an aggressive virus) from turning into a catastrophe for mankind (a pandemic with millions of victims), but don't know how to communicate it to the right people in the right time.

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## Notes and references

- <sup>1</sup> WHO, *Avian influenza: assessing the pandemic threat*, 2005. Available at: <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/H5N1-9reduit.pdf>