



Experts dismiss scare over bird flu

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By **DIANE CHUN**
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At a time when headlines trumpet the potential dangers of "bird flu," Gary Butcher is the man of the hour.

Butcher has been an extension veterinarian at the University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine since 1988. He was trained as a veterinarian specializing in avian diseases, and has a Ph.D. in poultry virology.

As the only poultry veterinarian in the state, Butcher fields phone calls and e-mails about avian flu every day.

Lately, he's been traveling the world, speaking to alarmed government officials and industry groups dispelling the myths and reinforcing the realities of avian influenza or so-called "bird flu."

Gary Butcher begins his presentation with a slide that shows a "news flash" from the British press agency Reuters reporting that avian flu "poses the single biggest threat to the world right now."

The H5N1 avian flu virus has led to the death of 150 million birds, either through infection or culling to prevent the virus from spreading. So far, however, the number of people who have become infected remains small, with 121 confirmed illnesses and 62 reported fatalities as of Monday. No one has yet been proven to have given avian influenza to someone else.

The World Health Organization continues to warn that a human pandemic may occur and has advised national governments to make contingency plans. President Bush is expected to announce today the White House strategy for handling a potential pandemic during a visit to the National Institutes of Health.

"The emphasis of all my work has changed to dealing with this madness," Butcher said Friday, while briefly back at his office on the UF campus in Gainesville. "Realistically, avian influenza is not a threat to people, but everywhere you go, it has turned into a circus."

He's been to Indonesia and Thailand, Hong Kong and Mexico, and a few days from now, he will be in Russia.

The poultry industries in those countries have been greatly disrupted because of the public's flu fear. In countries where poultry consumption has dropped by 75 percent, it's a real crisis, Butcher said. So from an economic perspective, bird flu is a big issue.

Millions of chickens and waterfowl have been slaughtered in Asia in an attempt to halt the spread of the bird virus known as H5N1, but Butcher said that of the billions of people who have probably been exposed, only about 120 have been reported to have fallen ill with avian flu. They were people who worked closely with chickens and came into contact with the birds' blood and feces.

Butcher also said that there has yet to be a proven case in which one person is known to have passed the illness on to another.

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Facts about bird flu

- Flu viruses occur naturally among birds.
- It was first described as "fowl plague" in Italy in 1878.
- Wild birds carry the viruses in their intestines but seldom become ill.
- Domesticated birds like chickens, ducks and turkeys can become sick or die.
- True bird-to-human transmission was not recognized before 1997.
- At least 120 people have fallen ill from avian flu; at least 60 have died.
- Human-to-human transmission has not yet been proven.

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Bird flu viruses have been around throughout history, he said. What is unique about the H5N1 strain is that, on rare occasions, it has shown the ability to infect humans.

"It is very inefficient, but it does manage," Butcher said.

That same inefficiency makes it much more likely that the virus can't replicate itself rapidly enough to spread from that first infected human to another, he said. Could happen, but not likely. That's his view.

But the virus can go from poultry to the wild bird population, which will carry it to other locales along their migration routes.

If and when it comes to this part of the world, Butcher predicts, it will get here via migratory shorebirds or waterfowl coming from Russia, through Siberia, across the Bering Strait, down through Alaska and Canada.

"That's how it is probably going to come in, and it is of very little relevance," he said, because the poultry industry in this part of the world is so different than in the parts of the world that have been affected so far.

Not all health officials are sounding a warning about avian influenza, either.

Dr. Marc Siegel, a practicing internist and associate professor of medicine at the New York University School of Medicine, is one physician who isn't buying into the scare scenario.

"If anything is contagious right now, it's judgment clouded by fear," Siegel said.

And if Americans are scared of avian flu now, Siegel continues, "imagine what will happen if a single scrawny, flu-ridden migratory bird somehow manages to reach our shores."

That, he maintains, is how the fear epidemic - as opposed to a flu pandemic - spreads.

Back to the unlikely scenario of those migratory birds carrying avian flu to a poultry house somewhere in Kansas.

"Only once in every blue moon do you get infection in a poultry house, and the government has a system of monitoring and eradication that means it is quickly wiped out," Butcher said. "So it can happen, but it is rare and it is not allowed to spread."

Because the United States exports about one-third of the 9 billion poultry produced, if potentially dangerous disease turns up, there is a policy of zero tolerance.

"Other countries would not accept poultry from anywhere in the United States if there was any question of infection," Butcher said.

He said that although there is a potential that the virus could mutate, as it exists, it could not become an important disease in humans.

"For it to become dangerous to humans, it has to go through a pretty significant genetic change. If you put this in perspective, it's not going to happen. For a person to be infected now, it appears that the exposure level has to be astronomical," Butcher said.

"While we are putting all our attention on this avian influenza, another virus is going to come up and bite us in the bottom," he said.

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