

Burial plan stirs up plague images

The Times

London: Families may have to wait for four months to bury their dead in the event of an avian flu pandemic, stirring up folk memories of the burial pits of the great plague of 1665, according to a confidential Home Office report.

The document says it is "prudent" to predict that as many as 320,000 people could die from the H5N1 strain of the virus if it mutates into a form that can readily be passed from human to human.

It says the emergency services may have to enforce "common burial", which would involve a "large number of coffins buried in the same place at the same time".

"Common [mass] burial stirs up images of the burial pits used in the great plague of 1665 where in London 70,000 people died," the paper states. "Common burial might involve a large number of coffins buried in the same place at the same time, in such a way that allowed for individual graves to be marked."

In the 17th-century outbreak, thousands of bodies had to be buried in the capital in "great pits" at places such as Finsbury Fields and Aldgate. The outbreak was only wiped out in the capital in 1666, after the great fire destroyed much of London.

The report, entitled *Managing Excess Deaths in an Influenza Pandemic*, dated March 22, warns that vaccines against bird flu should not be seen as a "silver bullet" solution. It adds that they "will not be available in the first wave of a pandemic [possibly longer]."

The document will guide local authorities on how to cope with the impact on humans of a pandemic. Defra, the agriculture ministry, has already drawn up guidelines for animals. It entrusts local committees, acting under central government instructions, with powers to control outbreaks by culling, vaccination and bans on animal movements.

Ministers have been warned that the threat posed by avian flu must be judged "one of the highest current risks to the UK". Government officials say an outbreak on the scale of the 1918 flu pandemic, which killed 50m people across the world, cannot be ruled out.

Sir Liam Donaldson, the chief medical officer, warned last year that the question "is not if the pandemic comes, but when".

Some researchers, however, are now questioning whether the threat is as severe as first feared. Studies released last week by Dutch and American scientists found that H5N1 may struggle to become established in the human population because it is inefficient at infecting cells high up in the human airway. This means it may be hard to pass from person to person by breathing, coughing or sneezing.

The new document, however, shows the government is still giving the threat high priority. It was discussed last week in cabinet subcommittee MISC 32, chaired by Patricia Hewitt, the health secretary.