

Home Office prepares for 'mass burials' if Avian flu mutates

Publisher: Keith Hall

Published: 02/04/2006 - 16:19:05 PM

A 'confidential report' has been leaked revealing that mass burials are being considered by the Home Office as part of preparations for a possible avian flu pandemic.

It contains the shocking statistic under a "prudent worst case" assessment which suggests that 320,000 could die in the UK if the H5N1 virus mutated into a form contagious to humans.

That would lead to delays of up to 17 weeks in burying or cremating victims, the document - said to have been discussed by a cabinet committee - says.

The report which the Sunday Times claims to have seen warns the UK population that it might have to come to terms with the horrendous prospect of "common burials" which would stir up images of the mass pits used to bury victims of the Great Plague in 1665.

However, these may in fact "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".

Town halls - the report suggests - could deal with what it terms a "base case" of 48,000 deaths in England and Wales in a 15-week pandemic.

But it adds: "Even with ramping local management capacity by 100%, the prudent worst case of 320,000 excess deaths is projected to lead to a delay of some 17 weeks from death to burial or cremation."

Should the outbreak kill 2.5% of those who contract the flu, it warns, "no matter what emergency arrangements are put in place there are likely to be substantially more deaths than can be managed within current timescales".

Titled Managing Excess Deaths in an Influenza Pandemic and dated March 22, the document says vaccines would not be available at least for "the first wave" of a pandemic and would not be a "silver bullet".

The newspaper said it was discussed last week in cabinet subcommittee MISC 32, in a meeting chaired by Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt.

It claimed ministers were alarmed at the prospect of such delays to burials but accepted that there might be no option in the event of a mass outbreak.



The Home Office prepares for Avian Flu pandemic

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Bird flu has already forced the slaughter of millions of birds across three continents since the deadly H5N1 strain emerged three years ago.

More than 100 humans have also been killed by it - all people who had been in close contact with infected birds.

A pandemic would only become a possibility if the strain was able to mutate into a form that could be spread between humans.

Yesterday, specialists warned that intensive care units at UK hospitals would be unable to cope with the extra demands of a bird flu pandemic.

Writing in the British Medical Journal, health experts said the Government's plans for dealing with a flu pandemic did not go far enough.

Chief Medical Officer Sir Liam Donaldson said preparing for a pandemic was "a top priority" and "strong plans" were in place to respond.

Those plans include building a stockpile of 14.6 million doses of anti-viral drugs to treat those who fall ill during a pandemic.

Sir Liam last year said that the question "is not if the pandemic comes, but when" although recent research has suggested the threat may be lower than initially thought.

The report seen by the Sunday Times suggests schools would have to close for up to 10 weeks to stop flu being spread in the playground -and special arrangements made for enclosed communities such as boarding schools and prisons.

The Home Office said it did not comment on leaked documents.

A spokesman added: "The Government is taking seriously the possible threat of an influenza pandemic in the light of the global situation and the possibility that a novel strain of the influenza virus could emerge.

"Prudent precautionary planning is under way across all elements of the response, including the health service, other essential services and local authorities."

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