

Bird flu: one dead swan, one billion items of information

'I am more scared of bird flu than football,' says Jose Mourinho, manager of Chelsea Football Club. 'What is football compared with life? A swan with bird flu, for me, that is the drama of the last two days. I have to buy some masks and stuff. I am serious. Maybe for my team as well.' Whether Mourinho's early April confession was a misinterpretation of the information about bird flu is unclear. It could have been an irrational fear of a man who has it all—health, wealth, success, and fame—and might only lose it through a stroke of ill fortune, such as handling the carcass of an H5N1 infected chicken. Or an attempt to ridicule the threat posed by his nearest rival Sir Alex Ferguson and his team Manchester United.

Inevitably, as Mourinho's words reflect, there is a sense of international panic about bird flu and its transmission. Will I catch it if I eat chicken or dine at a Chinese restaurant? Should I allow my children to have their piano lesson with their teacher who keeps chickens? Should I visit Vietnam, even France, on a business trip? What will I do if the pandemic strikes and I cannot lay my hands on a vial of Tamiflu? Health and emergency workers, managers, and politicians up and down the country are role-playing their response to bird flu's mutation into a human virus and how they would handle the subsequent pandemic. Memories of the BSE and MMR crises are fresh. Images of masked travellers, fearful of SARS, passing through airport lounges are in people's minds.

All those scares suffered from a breakdown in confidence between officialdom and the public; and much of that distrust was created by the quality of information and a sense that the public was being misled or falsely reassured. With bird flu, as England's chief medical officer Liam Donaldson explains (p. 222), the British media has created 1.4 billion 'weighted opportunities to see' information related to the potential pandemic. The measure of a 'megastory' is 250 million 'weighted opportunities to see'. Donaldson outlines the government's strategy, a strategy to which Jose Mourinho should pay careful attention.

The importance of information is highlighted by other articles in this month's issue. Majid Ezzati and colleagues from Harvard University demonstrate how population levels of obesity can be underreported if the measurement relies solely on self-report—men overestimate height and women underestimate weight—and they present the most accurate rankings yet of American states by levels of obesity (p. 250). Richard Smith charts the history of research misconduct, coinciding neatly with last month's establishment of the UK Research Integrity Office (p. 232). Journal editors share strong suspicions about the extent of research misconduct, but there is scant information to support those concerns. The new office may help inform us, which is the first step in combating research misconduct. Finally, the information about assisted suicide is hotly debated by both sides, and in this month's issue Ilora Finlay, The Royal Society of Medicine's next President, puts the case against the proposed parliamentary bill (p. 214).

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