

Daily Breeze

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Taking the guesswork out of bird flu

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Copley News Service

More than 100 representatives of public and private agencies that would be on the front lines of a bird flu pandemic -- if one were to occur in California -- gathered near Los Angeles International Airport on Monday to get to know each other and get advice for coping with a potential outbreak.

The officials -- representing several South Bay cities, other communities around California and several county and state agencies -- brimmed with questions about the avian flu. Among them:

- Would a quarantine be a viable option? (No.)
- What would happen if an infected bird falls into the water supply? (Nothing.)
- Would the county be able to remove all the dead birds affected by avian flu? (Officials say yes.)
- How long will it take to develop a vaccine? (That depends.)

In addition to providing those and other answers, the conference aimed to bring people together from hospitals, law enforcement, ambulance crews, public health and other agencies to network and exchange ideas, said Gunnar Kuepper, who led the conference as president of the regional chapter of the International Association of Emergency Managers.

"A bird flu pandemic is right now a very low-probability event, but if it happens, it could have a very high impact," Kuepper said. "Today is a chance for people to develop and link their plans."

Several attendees said they came to get accurate information about bird flu.

"We're all learning at the same time," said Gina Park, whose duties in the Rancho Palos Verdes City Manager's Office include coordinating emergency preparedness. "We're

hoping to learn what we need to prepare materials for public outreach."

She was joined at the meeting by officials from Torrance and Palos Verdes Estates. Also scheduled to attend were El Segundo and Lawndale officials.

Most of the cities represented at the meeting do not have comprehensive plans to deal with bird flu, said Michael Martinet, the executive director of the South Bay's Office of Disaster Management. Monday's meeting gave them a chance to see what they need to consider when developing plans, he explained.

Cities also would need to work together to develop a coordinated plan in the event of an outbreak, because the public would need to hear a consistent message about what to do, Martinet added.

Some of the advice that cities could circulate would be simple, such as wash your hands often and don't touch dead birds. Cities also need to decide whether to develop plans for preventing people from going to churches, bars and other gathering places.

Still, officials were told emphatically not to rely on quarantines. Even if officials could confine large numbers of exposed people in a limited area, birds and insects could still fly away. History shows that in such situations, people get out and the virus does, too, Kuepper said.

Another surprising tip: Raw chicken or dead birds can carry the virus indefinitely, depending on the weather. In Southern California, the virus is likely to live for at least six days even after the carrier has died, Kuepper said. But cooked chicken is safe because heat kills the bird flu virus.

Currently, he pointed out, bird flu is only easily transmissible from bird to bird, and while humans can catch it from birds, humans can't yet catch it from other humans. The big fear is that the disease, which in its present form kills about 60 percent of all people infected, will mutate and become as transmissible as the common cold, Kuepper said.

If it mutates, there's no way to tell whether it will be wildly dangerous or relatively harmless. It's unlikely to still be deadly to humans if it mutates, Kuepper said, which is part of the reason it's impossible to make a surefire vaccine ahead of time. Until scientists know what the virus will be, they have to guess about how to defend against it.

Developing a vaccine for a specific version of the virus would take three months "if we're lucky," or nine months "if we're very unlucky," Kuepper said.

"Our goal will be buying time until we can make a vaccine," he said.

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