

# THE INTERDEPENDENT

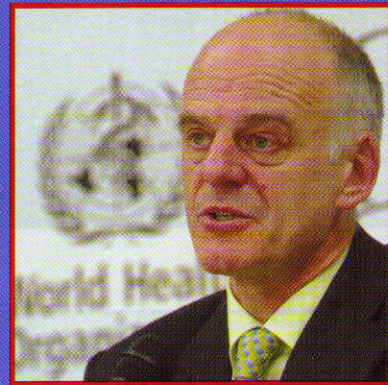
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## Taking on Avian Flu

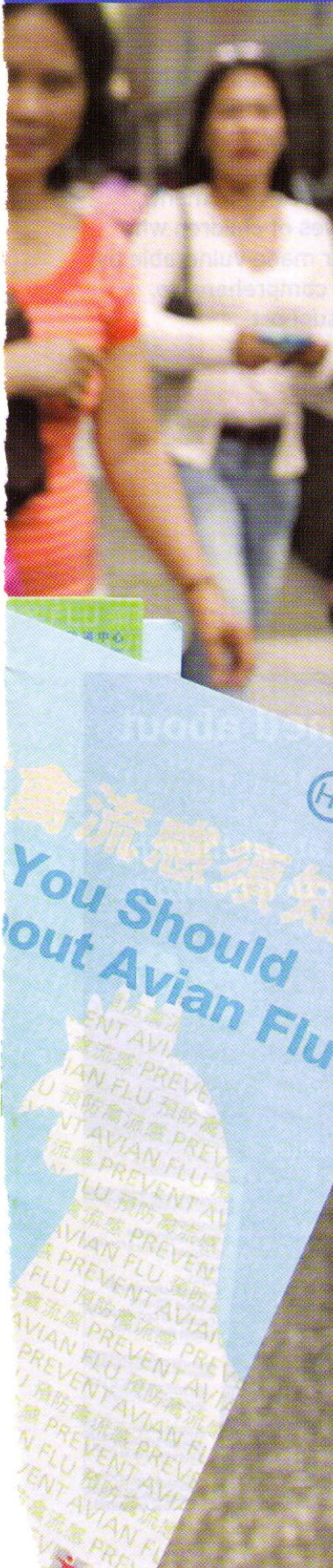
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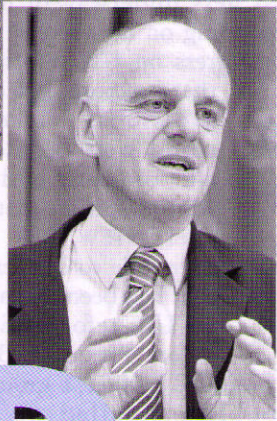
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David Nabarro:  
Taking on a  
Task of



# Pandemic Proportions

*In September 2005, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed Dr. David Nabarro to coordinate a global effort against avian flu. Here, Nabarro talks with **Jan Goodwin** about carrying out this monumental task, the uncertainties ahead and the personal precautions he is taking to avoid infection.*

David Nabarro's frenetic lifestyle is clearly illustrative of the enormous responsibility with which he is charged: Senior Coordinator for Avian and Human Influenza for the entire United Nations system. It is perhaps just as well that the 56-year-old UN Assistant Secretary-General is an amateur runner, since he spends most days sprinting between back-to-back meetings, and multi-tasking with the energy and laser focus of a man half his age. His cell phone rings almost constantly with calls from around the world and he clocks more international flying miles than most shuttle diplomats. "Currently, I'm working from 7 am to about 10 pm, seven days a week," he said in January interview with *The InterDependent*. "I'm getting about five hours' sleep a night."

A Londoner who joined the UN in 1999 as head of the World Health Organization's Roll Back Malaria program, and who has subsequently held several leadership positions in environmental health, food safety and, most recently, crisis operations, Dr. Nabarro is the man responsible for fending off the next global pandemic. He's spearheading the program intended to curb the potentially deadly impact if the flu virus now killing millions of birds globally mutates and crosses over into the human population. As such, he must ensure that the UN system—and thus, the world's nations—supports effective preparations to reduce the human toll, as well as the economic and social disruption that this pandemic could cause.

"It's what I've been training all my

life for," said the leading public health specialist as he grabbed a muffin, coffee and a table in the corner of an empty assembly room at UN headquarters. "But my experience does make me realize how difficult it will be. It is daunting, carries an enormous responsibility and has very high stakes."

## The Risks

The stakes are high indeed. If avian influenza type H5N1 mutates so that it can spread from human to human, millions of deaths are expected. Nabarro got into trouble early on in the post last September when he told a group of reporters that between 5 million and 150 million people could die. "I guess I was naive about what the response would be." Later that evening, walking past Manhattan's Times Square,





Gowned and masked veterinary workers arrive to inspect ducks for avian flu in Thailand.

National Geographic Society/Lynn Johnson

"The threat of a pandemic is not going to go away," said Nabarro. "It will be with us forever. And not just an influenza pandemic. I'm talking about diseases that come from the animal kingdom and threaten humans." The important issue about influenza is that it is a very changeable virus, he pointed out, which is capable of altering itself to become less or more serious as a cause of death, and to become less or more easily transmissible between animals and humans, and humans and humans. "At intervals, it breaks out from animals into humans in a particularly unpleasant way, leading to a lot of deaths and major suffering."

According to Nabarro, governments need to develop strong defenses against that happening. The sort of rapid response defense he is referring to is the kind that Thailand recently put into place, in which a network of 800,000 volunteers, one for every Thai village, reports any unusual chicken deaths. "It's an excellent program. The Thais are showing the rest of the world how to do it," he said. "They also backed up the system with the capacity to investigate suspect cases, and to follow up with laboratory studies."

Nabarro is also impressed by the bird vaccination program introduced by Vietnam and China. "There is now some chance of these two countries reducing avian flu from being endemic to epidemic." In addition, Vietnam and the UN jointly launched in January an intensive campaign to educate the public about avian flu.

Culling is also a key defense, but it is testing veterinary services in many countries. Wide scale killing of birds as a preventive measure is highly unpopular with poultry farmers, whose livelihoods depend on their flocks, and compensation for destroyed birds may not be sufficient, or may be delayed. It also presents a logistical challenge, as it is difficult to catch the birds that must be slaughtered. "Once a flock is infected, the only way to get control over these diseases is to kill the animals affected by the outbreaks. And to kill them quickly," said Nabarro. "If you wait too long, the disease becomes entrenched, and then you've got serious problems."

With more than 1.4 billion poultry already preventively killed, it still isn't clear if people who cull infected birds are themselves at risk for being infected. It's theorized that there are some people who are mildly infected by the bird flu, and others who become severely ill. It's possible that the mild cases are more numerous than previously thought. "At the moment, we think there is a pretty low likelihood that humans will become infected by the birds," pointed out Nabarro. "You have to be in pretty close contact, as in touching, playing with or even eating uncooked bird flesh in order to get the infection."

This would seem to be supported by a recent report from the Swedish Karolinska Institute that suggests the level of human fatalities from avian flu

## Fast Facts

- The H5N1 bird, or avian, flu virus was first identified in Scotland in 1959.
- There are 15 types of the virus. Migratory waterfowl, most notably wild ducks, carry these viruses in saliva, nasal secretions and feces.
- Apart from being highly contagious, avian flu viruses are readily transmitted from farm to farm by contaminated equipment, feed, cages or clothing. The viruses can survive for long periods in the environment, especially when temperatures are low.
- The H5N1 avian flu virus—the primary type of virus of concern—mutates rapidly and can acquire genes from viruses infecting other animal species. It has the ability to cause severe disease in humans.
- The first cases of human transmission occurred in Hong Kong in 1997, when one of three infected people died.
- Several countries have reported human cases of avian flu, including Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Thailand, Turkey and Vietnam. The virus has also been found in birds in the Middle East and several European countries. As birds make their spring migration back home, there is concern that countries all over Europe will be affected. —J.G.

Nabarro was horrified to see giant headlines on the electronic news zippers reading: "UN expert says 150 million are going to die."

Said Nabarro, "That was me of course, and the news editor had deleted the wide range of statistics I'd given, and just gone with the higher number. I wanted to put my head into a waste bin. I knew I'd be accused of scaremongering."

A spokesman for the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva, Dick Thompson, promptly held a press conference to announce that the UN agency's official estimate of the number of people who could die was between 2 million and 7.4 million.

Since then, Nabarro has taken pains not to put a figure to the potential pandemic deadly toll. What Nabarro does say is that he is certain that there will be another influenza pandemic. "It is just a matter of when." Health experts agree that the world is overdue for a flu pandemic like the one in 1918 that killed some 50 million people worldwide. Two subsequent but smaller flu pandemics, in 1957 and 1968, caused the death of nearly two million people. In both cases, the virus developed when avian and human flu genes mixed.





World Health Organization workers test birds in China, 2004.

World Health Organization/Pierre Virot

may have been overestimated, and that although possibly more people became sick than was known, a smaller proportion died.

Still, cautions Nabarro, "We have to remember that this is human mortality from bird flu. Humans are not the primary host in this case. And although it's great that we're not getting so many deaths, it's not fundamentally relevant to the more underlying concern—that the H5N1 virus may mutate into a form that is transmissible between humans. There are so many uncertainties. And that's the worry.

"If you had said to me that we were going to end up with more than 20 reports of outbreaks of H5N1 avian influenza in Turkey by the second week of January this year, I would have said, 'No. It just couldn't get that kind of rapid toehold in a country in Europe.' But it's happened. We're being surprised by some things, because they're coming in strange twists. We expected some human cases in Turkey, but we didn't expect the number we've seen."

According to Yanzhong Huang, an expert in global health and director of the Center for Global Health Studies at Seton Hall University, "All kinds of factors make the rapid spread of disease possible. Globalization, urbanization

and modern travel—diseases can now travel at jet speed. There is also the looming threat of bioterrorism." Migratory patterns of wild fowl, who harbor the disease, are a factor as well.

Scientists now believe there are characteristics of the avian flu virus in the more recent outbreaks that suggest it has changed, making it more easily able to infect humans. "There does seem to be evidence of patterns of variation in

the H5N1 virus, which means we have to stay on guard because the next variation, or the one after that, might be the variation that leads to human transmission," said Nabarro. "I can't say we're a step nearer to that happening because we don't know. I can say that we are being reminded that this could happen. This is nature's wake-up call."

Nabarro acknowledges that the variation may even work in our favor. He notes there could be a parallel with the HIV virus, in which it sometimes infects people who never go on to develop AIDS. "We're working on it, but we simply don't know yet."

Should a human pandemic develop, the World Bank concluded that the economic global cost could reach \$800 billion in the first year alone.

"It would throw the world into a global recession like the one we saw in the 1930s," added Huang. "There would be social and political impacts, too. The 1918 pandemic took its toll of people in their most productive age, and the same may well happen again, in part because older people have developed a certain immunity to influenzas. The lack of knowledge about the disease, the spread of rumors, would push panic into a high level...and destabilize some countries."

According to WHO, no country will have adequate supplies of vaccine at the start of a pandemic or for many months

## Safeguards at Home

Although avian flu has not yet hit the United States, here are a few things to keep in mind.

- Poultry and poultry products from areas free of the disease can be prepared and consumed as usual, with no fear of acquiring infection of the virus.
- There is no evidence that properly cooked poultry or poultry products—even if contaminated—will infect humans. In fact, the H5N1 virus is sensitive to heat and normal cooking temperatures will kill it.
- The World Health Organization recommends that all poultry and poultry products be prepared following good hygienic practices: properly wash and cook poultry meat and eggs; do not allow poultry juices to touch or mix with items eaten raw; wash hands and contacted surfaces with soap and hot water after preparing poultry; do not consume raw poultry eggs.
- Since pet birds can be infected with H5N1 if exposed to a bird sick with the virus, owners and their families should not touch a sick bird. It is recommended that avian pets are fed and given water indoors to avoid contamination by wild birds. —J.G.





World Health Organization workers test birds in China, 2004.

World Health Organization/Pierre Viriot

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thereafter. A vaccine needs to closely match the actual pandemic virus so commercial production cannot begin prior to emergence or characterization of the virus. Consequently, large-scale commercial vaccine production is not likely to start until several months following its emergence.

What precautions does Nabarro, a father of five, ages 5 to 21, take as he visits countries with avian flu out-

**“The threat of a pandemic is not going to go away. It will be with us forever.”**

breaks? “I’m not going into contact with diseased birds and touching them. And I’m practicing what I want everybody else to practice, which is good hygiene: Thoroughly washing my hands. And at all times, I’m making sure that I eat properly cooked food.” Although he had a flu shot this winter, “there’s only a hope,” he said, “not a certainty, that flu shots will diminish the chances of contracting avian flu.”

### **The Outcomes**

Assessing his time in office thus far, Nabarro said modestly, “Although I can’t claim credit for it, I’ve seen governments take the pandemic threat a lot more seriously at the political level over the past few months.” The United States’ work to develop a new vaccine and other scientific measures is just one example Nabarro described.

“The US’s leadership on avian flu has been extraordinary. So, too, is the work of all the UN agencies.... The world’s much better prepared to deal with a pandemic and much more focused on avian influenza now than it was three or four months ago.”

When he started, Nabarro’s first objectives were to get the UN system to jointly work on the massive program, both within the organization, and also with governments, the private sector and voluntary agencies, he said. “With the Red Cross movement and other vol-

untary agencies, we have some effective partnerships emerging in the front line.... I think we’re communicating well with the different branches of the UN...and we’re launching a massive communication campaign, so that everybody, everywhere, knows the risks.”

Speaking about these actions, Nabarro gives the impression of being an extremely talented conductor in charge of a vast symphony orchestra, who rarely slows down. With his grueling, highly demanding schedule, one might wonder if he ever unwinds. He does, he said—through pop music. “One of the best things I did recently was to take an evening off to go and see U2 at Madison Square Garden.

“I was a child of the ‘60s, and as a student at Oxford, I was a part-time disc jockey,” he explained. “Life is kind of like disc jockeying. It’s sensing the mood, and just getting people moving...and working in ways that they wouldn’t ordinarily do. Today, that’s my philosophy—I’m a disc jockey of life.”

He grins. “I must go. I’m overdue at my next meeting,” he said, as his cell phone rings again. Snatching up his now gelid coffee and half-eaten muffin, he literally boogies out the door, rushing to meet the newest challenge of keeping the world safe from the looming influenza crisis.

Nabarro barely had time to catch his breath before he was on a plane to China for the Beijing International Pledging Conference on Avian and Human Influenza, where he hoped to see countries pledge \$1.5 billion to help contain avian flu and stop it from crossing over to humans. “I see this amount as start-up money. We’re going to need a lot more eventually,” he told UNA-USA.

In Beijing, he cautioned that the world is not yet prepared for a human flu pandemic, and that animal health services around the world are not yet strong enough to monitor bird flu outbreaks effectively and cull poultry flocks. By the end of the two-day conference, \$1.9 billion had been pledged. ■

*—Ms. Goodwin is an award-winning journalist, who frequently writes about health issues.*

## **In the Fight**

A number of United Nations bodies and nongovernmental organizations are enforcing measures to counter the threat of an avian flu pandemic. Here’s a look at what a few are doing on the ground.

### **World Health Organization (WHO)**

In addition to carrying out global surveillance and providing research institutes with vaccine composition recommendations, WHO is undertaking outbreak investigations of the virus and coordinating responses to stop its spread.

### **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)**

In April 2005, FAO, together with the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), founded the OIE/FAO Network of Expertise on Avian Influenza to establish regional networks of laboratories and surveillance teams. FAO also has teamed up with research institutes in several countries to provide training in avian flu isolation and diagnosis for public health industry workers.

### **UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF)**

In Turkey, where all four fatalities of the flu have been children thus far, UNICEF has assembled a task force to ensure that preventive strategies, with a particular focus on child safety, are properly communicated. Additionally, in anticipation of the start of the school year on January 30, UNICEF arranged for counselors to be stationed in schools to help children cope with the anxiety and fear brought about by the current outbreak.

### **International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies**

In Indonesia, representatives of the Indonesian Red Cross are disinfecting poultry farms and other potential breeding spots for the virus. Volunteers are also handing out informational packets and issuing constant updates about avian flu to raise community awareness and to counter rumors about the virus. The Turkish Red Crescent Society is implementing a similar awareness campaign in Turkey and the overall federation, headquartered in Geneva, is drafting a global strategy to prepare for possible human to human transmission.

—Ken L