

Avian influenza in the media

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The article that I chose to discuss is entitled " Avian Flu: Is the Government Ready for an Epidemic?" and was published on the ABC News website on September 15, 2005. The journalist's name was not published.

The article opens with the lines " It could kill a billion people worldwide, make ghost towns out of parts of major cities, and there is not enough medicine to fight it. It is called the avian flu." Throughout the rest of the article, the journalist goes on about the horrors that could occur if avian flu were to mutate so that it was able to be transferred from human to human, and not just from bird to human as is now the case.

The journalist quotes Dr. Irwin Redlener, the director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness as saying " The tipping point, the place where it becomes something of an immediate concern, is where that virus changes, we call it mutates, to something that is able to go from human to human," and then states that scientists around the world are now working around the clock as they wait for that tipping point.

However, at no time does he inform the reader that all viruses mutate naturally over and over again, and that the chance of the H5N1 strain, mutating into a strain that could pass from human to human is in no way an eventuality, or even a likely outcome. He just takes quotes from various scientists around the world who are expressing a worry about what could happen in the event that H5N1 were to mutate, and uses them to imply that this is a very likely possibility.

The journalist also likens an Avian Flu pandemic to Hurricane Katrina, an event that was at the forefront of people's minds when the article was

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published and uses purposefully disturbing imagery that has been shown on TV about Hurricane Katrina, such as people dying in the airports and the utter helplessness of the Superbowl, to cause people to panic and worry that bird flu is likely to devastate the country at any second in order to bring to light the Government's unpreparedness for an outbreak.

He then goes on to discuss what he calls an "inadequate stockpile of medicine" and blames the Government for not having stockpiled enough Tamiflu, which he equates to a miracle drug which will stop H5N1 in its tracks. However, while he is happy to imply, in the beginning of the article, that the H5N1 virus is likely to mutate at any time, he conveniently ignores this when he talks about Tamiflu, and nowhere does he state that while this drug can help people who have contracted bird flu, it is only useful to the current strain of the virus and if it mutates, which he assures us it will, there is no guarantee that it will be of any use to those infected.

I feel that these are unforgivable exaggerations of the disease and its dangers and that the journalist was simply interested in sensationalism and causing a public outcry and panic. Expert opinions on the dangers of the H5N1 virus are currently very varied and divided and a lot is still unknown about the disease, but at no time does this article bring that to light. Laura Chang, of the New York Times said it best when she said that journalists shouldn't "write articles that might feed a sense of panic, such as telling people to stock up on Tamiflu, or dramatizing how a pandemic would spread through a particular city. Sometimes silence is the best journalism."

Website: <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/Investigation/Story?id=1130392&page=1>

MRSA in the media

This article on MRSA, or the Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, was published in the British newspaper, the Sunday Metro, under the headline “Strain of superbug 'may be new HIV.'”

The article opens with “A deadly new drug-resistant strain of the superbug MRSA could spread rapidly through the gay community, experts have warned.” It then goes on to equate MRSA to the HI virus when it says:

The infection is already moving through parts of San Francisco in the same way as HIV and Aids did in the early 1980s. The bug, which can lead to a deadly flesh-eating form of pneumonia, is 13 times more prevalent among the city's gay men than other people.

However, at no time does the article explain what MRSA is or that it is not in fact, anything like HIV or AIDS. MRSA is in fact caused by a bacterium, already a vast difference from the virus that causes aids, that is responsible for difficult-to-treat infections in humans. The organism can also be further classified into either Community-Associated MRSA or Hospital-Associated MRSA depending on the circumstances in which the patient acquired the disease.

The article goes on to focus on one strain of the disease, a strain known as the USA300 strain and the journalist notes that “the USA300 bug, is not caught in hospitals but spreads through a community, often by casual
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contact” which is true, as it is a community-associated strain of MRSA that is spread by skin to skin contact. However, the journalist then goes on to suggest that this strain, which is as a particularly antibiotic resistant epidemic that is responsible for rapidly progressive, fatal diseases, is only likely to affect the gay community.

However this is not the case and as MRSA is not a sexually transmitted disease there is no way it could only affect only the gay community. The USA300 strain is passed on by skin-to-skin contact and therefore cannot be likened to HIV which is transmitted only through direct contact with the bodily fluids of an infected individual. While practicing homosexuals are at risk of being affected by the USA300 strain, the disease has also been reported by people in athletic teams, correctional facilities, military recruits and newborn nurseries.

I believe this article is simply an example of sensationalism in the media. It does not focus on any of the facts, and makes purposefully sweeping and false statements about MRSA and its similarity to HIV, which couldn't be further from the truth. The two are nothing like each other, one caused by a bacteria and one by a virus. One transmitted sexually and the other just by touching someone that has been infected. It was written simply to get people to buy the newspaper, and should be ignored.

Website: http://www.metro.co.uk/news/article.html?in_article_id=83921;in_page_id=34;expand=true