

## **ORGANISATIONS WARNED TO PREPARE FOR LOOMING BIRD FLU PANDEMIC**

### **PR will be critical**

With the global rise in the number of H5N1 avian influenza virus (H5N1) incidents and positive identifications of the virus being reported in Nigeria and Egypt, South African companies are cautioned to have PR crisis contingency plans in place to deal with a possible outbreak. PR companies are also urged to ensure they develop crisis communications plans that can be rapidly rolled out across the country should their clients have a high-risk profile.

"PR companies and corporate communication departments in companies of all sizes, irrespective of what industry they are in, are warned not to treat the potential threat that H5N1 poses lightly," says Evan Bloom, MD of Crisis Communications Consultancy. "They will need to communicate immediately; there will be no second chance."

The Yale School of Medicine says flu viruses almost always appear first in birds, and then mutate into forms that can infect and travel in humans. The fear is that H5N1 will follow this path, and snowball into a global pandemic that could wipe out millions of people. So debilitating is the virus - it kills seven out of 10 people who become infected - that if it becomes endemic, it will bring down not only a whole company's manufacturing capability, but also potentially entire countries and their economies.

### **Crisis management preparedness for H5N1 must have three strategic thrusts:**

- The implementation of an early warning system that monitors staff health and levels of absenteeism;
- The implementation of business continuity and resumption plans; and
- The creation of a rapid communications plan that will help companies and organisations communicate with their staff, the media, clients, suppliers, health and safety authorities as well as the communities that surround their offices/organisations/manufacturing facilities.

The communications plan is arguably the most important aspect of any contingency and local companies must have communications methodologies in place that target semiliterate and illiterate employees. "All staff from boardroom level down to the factory floor will need to know what the status of the H5N1 virus is in their company, that their jobs are safe, and when their company will be closing or re-opening. The media will form a crucial part of the communications process," adds Bloom.

The virus could also affect the way business is conducted. For example, suppliers will need to know when they can start delivering components and ingredients to production facilities and customers will want to know when they can safely start purchasing the end product. Customers, suppliers and staff will need messages of reassurance that everything is being done to manage the situation and to get products, services and solutions out to the market.

External individuals such as consultants will also be at risk; these include health officials, veterinarians, members of the local communities, and family members of employees at high-risk organisations. "Companies are urged to remember that no supply chain exists in isolation. Many supply chains are integrated and a disruption at one point could have knock-on effects for other companies," says Bloom.

South African companies who send their employees to the countries where H5N1 has been identified must have contingency plans in place should an employee become ill. These countries include: France, Turkey, Nigeria, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam.

### **Companies, organisations and industries that could be affected by H5N1 include:**

1. Government, both regional and national, health departments and municipalities;
2. Agriculture and abattoirs;
3. Patients with full blown AIDS (They are at risk because of a weak immune system);
4. Logistics;
5. Hospitals, both private and state-owned;
6. Medical aids (IT networks and call centres will see a major increase in traffic for hospital and medication authorisation);
7. Retail organisations including supermarkets and restaurants;
8. Airlines and the travel industry;

9. Funeral companies (in the case of mass deaths); and
10. Pharmaceutical manufacturers.

The following 10 factors, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), must be noted:

1. **Pandemic influenza is different from avian influenza.**
2. **Influenza pandemics are recurring events.**
3. Three pandemics occurred in the previous century: "Spanish influenza" in 1918, killing an estimated 40-50 million people worldwide, "Asian influenza" in 1957 which killed an estimated 2 million, and "Hong Kong influenza" in 1968 and this caused 1 million deaths.
4. **The world may be on the brink of another pandemic.**
5. **All countries will be affected.**
6. **Widespread illness will occur.**
7. **Medical supplies will be inadequate.**
8. **Large numbers of deaths will occur.**
9. **Economic and social disruption will be great.**
10. **Every country must be prepared.**
11. **WHO will alert the world when the pandemic threat increases.**

Detailed information on these 10 points can be found at:  
<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic10things/en/index.html> )

For further information please refer to the Crisis Communications Consultancy website  
[www.crisiscomms.com](http://www.crisiscomms.com)

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