

Battle for a Vaccine

Each year 1.4 million children under the age of 5, almost from the developing world, die from diseases that could be prevented with a vaccine. For most of us, those needless deaths prick our consciences and motivate us to open our wallets, but they don't threaten our own wealth. Avian influenza in Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand, the possibility that the bird flu could mutate and become a pandemic is a serious threat to us all. That's why Jakarta's fight with the World Health Organization (WHO) over how an avian flu vaccine should be developed and distributed is so important.

For 50 years, countries around the world have shared new flu strains with the WHO to help scientists track genetic changes in the fast-mutating virus. The WHO uses that information to create a seed strain to drug companies at no cost, which then manufacture and sell commercial flu vaccines. That process continued with avian flu until late last year, when Indonesia – the country that has suffered the most bird-flu deaths – suddenly stopped sharing virus samples and instead signed an agreement with the US drug company Baxter to provide virus strains in exchange for help in eventually producing its own vaccine. Jakarta health officials argued that it was unfair for them to give away viruses that might be used to make a pandemic vaccine Indonesia – and other developing countries would never have enough money to buy. With global flu-vaccine production capacity reaching 500 million doses a year and everyone in the world clamouring for a shot should a pandemic occur, a vaccine would almost certainly be priced out of their reach!

By the serious logic of virology, Indonesia's decision was unreasonable and self-defeating. We need surveillance in every nation to track bird flu as it changes. But Jakarta got the attention of WHO officials, who came to the Indonesian capital earlier this week for an emergency meeting at which Health Minister Siti Fadila Supari called the current distribution system "more dangerous than the threat of an H5N1 pandemic itself".

On March 27 the two sides reached a temporary compromise: Indonesia would resume sharing virus samples with the WHO, but for now that access wouldn't be extended to the drug industry. That means that scientists can once again track the virus as it mutates, but companies can't use it to make a vaccine without Indonesia's permission. Further negotiations will be needed, but for now, Indonesia's intransigence has made the rest of us take notice of essential global health inequalities.

By Bryan Walsh, *Time*, April 9, 2007 p. 95.

Vocabulary

Avian influenza: a bird flu

A strain: a distinct variety of a virus

A sample: a specimen taken for scientific testing

A drug company: a company which manufactures medicines.

Guided commentary (20 points)

1. What is “needless death”, according to the text?
2. Referring to the text, say why the avian influenza represents a threat to people’s health.
3. In the light of the text, state the reason why Indonesia refused to share virus samples with the World Health Organization.
4. According to the text, to what extent has Indonesia’s refusal been effective?
5. Is it possible for developing countries to free themselves from the tyranny of drug companies? Why or why not?