



Chicken Little and the Swine Flu Scare

I can't remember if it was Henny Penny or Chicken Little, nor do I recall what landed on said fowl's head, either a leaf or an acorn, but I do remember that there was an ensuing panic as the hen in question ran around the barnyard yelling, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

Following the news of the "swine flu" since April, one gets the feeling that that old mantra, "The sky is falling," is back. While the swine flu scare is the latest in a string of panics about possible pandemics, (think West Nile, SARS, the Bird Flu, etc.), none have been hyped with such consistency and ferocity. Perusing Google News almost daily, I have yet to see a day when they didn't have swine flu as a front page story. The story broke in April and the reports from Mexico were frightening — some media outlets reported hundreds dead, many others reported scores dead "with possibly many more." By the time the first U.S. death occurred (a Mexican girl who had been brought to the United States for treatment), the WHO was reporting only six deaths, with the little girl being number seven. While every death is a tragedy, it didn't take a rocket scientist to see that this flu was being hyped up.



By late May, the World Health Organization had labeled the outbreak a worldwide pandemic. About a week later they raised the threat level from four to five, and then on June 11, the WHO declared the H1N1 swine flu to be a level six pandemic, the very highest threat level, and labeled the pandemic "unstoppable." Many "experts" were trotted out in the media saying there was a high likelihood that the pandemic would erupt with a vengeance come fall, quite possibly in a much more virulent form. The specter of the 1918 flu epidemic was repeatedly raised, similar to how it was used in the 1976 panic.

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Of course one has to ask, is there reason to panic? Will this "pandemic" kill hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Americans? To date, the evidence seems to indicate that the "2009 Novel Type A (H1N1)" or so called swine flu, is a relatively mild flu. It is very difficult to get accurate numbers regarding how many people have contracted the H1N1 flu and how many deaths have occurred. One of



Written by [Gary Benoit](#) on September 16, 2009

the reasons that the statistics are shaky is because the method of counting H1N1 flu deaths has changed. At first, the WHO was reporting confirmed cases where a swab was taken from the patient and a culture showed a match to the H1N1 virus. This takes time, costs money, and there are a limited number of labs that can do this. Later, "probable" cases started being reported if the patient was cultured using one of the rapid influenza antigen tests. These tests only differentiate between type A and type B, and have a fairly high false-negative rate. If the patient presented with flu symptoms and had a positive rapid test for type A, the case was presumed to be swine flu, but there is no way to determine if you are actually dealing with one of the many other seasonal type A influenzas. In Third World countries where medical services are much less sophisticated, "suspected" cases were counted based on symptoms.

The current death toll varies depending on the source. A recent WHO report pegged the number of deaths worldwide at 2,138 since April, although some U.S. government reports place the number around 3,000. While these deaths are tragic, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control claims that seasonal flu kills 36,000 Americans every year, and the WHO reports that there are between 250,000 and 500,000 deaths worldwide every year from the seasonal flu, depending on its severity. Using these figures, on average, 3,000 people per month die from the flu in the United States and between 21,000 and 42,000 people die per month worldwide. While many, including this author, feel that both the CDC's and the WHO's statistics are exaggerated, one can see that, taking the high number of 3,000 deaths worldwide in five months, the death toll of H1N1 pales compared to their estimate of the death toll of the seasonal flu.

Indeed the reports from doctors and patients around the world seem to bear out the fact that this H1N1 is a relatively mild flu. However, you may have heard the argument that this flu is killing young, otherwise healthy people. I have only been able to find anecdotal reports about this, but clearly there have been deaths of young, apparently healthy people from this flu, just as there are deaths in young, healthy individuals from the flu every year. Without looking at these deaths on a case-by-case basis, it is impossible to know why an individual died, but so far, I have been unable to find any statistics showing this flu is any more dangerous to young people than any other flu, despite considerable time searching for this information.

So, is the sky falling? The media and government insist it is, but the facts don't support the level of hype.

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