



Swine Flu Outbreak May Be Overblown

While it is still too early to claim that the swine flu outbreak is being overblown, events are beginning to suggest that may prove to be the case. As of Wednesday, the numbers of people seeking flu treatment in Mexico had dwindled markedly, and the death rate has nearly vanished; only one new death was announced on Wednesday by Mexican authorities.



The new flu strain has been reported in many countries, including nearly 100 cases in the United States, but so far, only one death has occurred outside of Mexico — a Mexican toddler visiting family in Houston, who had apparently contracted the disease south of the border.

None of which is to trivialize the possibility that this or some future flu strain might not become the next Spanish flu-like pandemic, but conditions have changed drastically since 1918. Living conditions are much more sanitary, and medicine has improved exponentially. Even a flu virus with the potency of the Spanish flu would probably not exact anywhere near the toll of the 1918-1919 pandemic, usually believed to be the greatest epidemic in human history, in absolute terms.

Moreover, the flu claims tens of thousands of American lives every winter, this most recent winter having been a particularly severe germ season. Influenza is one of the top killers worldwide, yet the human race has managed to deal with the annual onslaught of flu viruses.

From this author's personal experience, the flu is often much more virulent in tropical countries; the sickest I have ever been was with the flu in southern India around Christmastime. The fever and associated symptoms, including a sore throat that was beyond anything I have experienced before or since, kept me confined to a hotel bed for days, and weakened for substantially longer than that.

But despite every indication that H1N1 is unlikely to decimate the human race, the UN's World Health Organization continues to churn out scary rhetoric, ramping up its pandemic threat level index (in a matter reminiscent of Homeland Security's periodic color-coded terrorist warnings) to 5, meaning that a global pandemic is imminent. Talk of quarantines, border closings, and other extreme measures continues to foment panic in some quarters; the government of Egypt announced the slaughter of every pig in the country, despite lack of clear evidence as to the precise origin of H1N1.

While it is possible that this easily transmissible strain of influenza may cut a swathe across the world, or perhaps fall dormant in the Northern Hemisphere summer and re-emerge more potent in the fall, it is far more likely that the swine flu panic — like its predecessor in 1976, will prove to be a damp squib. But that won't stop government at every level from milking this crisis for all they can get.

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