

Hugh White

Prepare now for the pandemic and the panic

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You may have heard of H5N1. It's a strain of flu virus. The experts agree there is a significant chance it will cause a global pandemic on a scale that would profoundly affect the lives of every Australian. As a society we need to come to terms with that risk. Talking about it seems like a good way to start.

I'm not a health professional; I'm a defence strategist. That means I think a lot about how to manage risks that, like wars, are relatively unlikely, but very serious if they occur. When you think about H5N1 that way, it looks to be by far the most serious risk we face.

H5N1 is a new and unusually virulent strain of flu. It appeared in 1997 in a form that is highly contagious among birds, and it has devastated poultry industries in East Asia. The risk is that somewhere in the world, sometime in the next few years, H5N1 will mutate into a form that is highly contagious among humans.

How likely is that? The good news is there is a better than even chance it will never happen. But sensible opinion estimates the odds to be at least 10 per cent over the next few years, and some experts think the risk higher. To me, a 10 per cent probability looks like a very big risk indeed.

How serious would it be? First, experts fear the highly contagious mutations would spread around the world swiftly and there is no reason to expect we would be spared.

Second, there is unlikely to be an effective vaccine available if a pandemic hits. Vaccines need to be developed specifically for each strain of flu — after the mutation appears. That would take some months, by which time the pandemic would have taken hold. Antiviral drugs might slow the disease and provide some protection from infection, but their effectiveness is uncertain and supplies are limited.

That means an H5N1 pandemic would directly affect a lot of Australians. One British estimate suggests that 25 per cent of the population would be infected, and that 2.5 per cent of those would die. In Australia, that means 100,000 people could die.

A pandemic on this scale would disrupt many aspects of our daily life and people would be discouraged from moving about and congregating, in order to limit the spread of infection. The economy would grind to a halt. There could even be pressure on social order, as overstretched medical facilities struggled to cope, and other essential services were undermined by illness in key staff and overwhelmed by unprecedented demand.

From what I have read, the Government has quietly done a good job of preparing to handle a pandemic — stockpiling drugs and equipment, establishing organisations, making plans.

But, by the nature of the problem, all the preparations in the world will not prevent a disaster if the pandemic strikes. How does the Government prepare the public for a risk of this nature, without inducing panic? How do we prepare ourselves as a society to respond coolly, calmly and sensibly in what could perhaps be the most stressful situation our generation has faced?

The starting point must be honest, accurate, reliable information. The Health Minister, Tony Abbott, has shown how this can be done. An excellent speech he delivered in May has won international praise as a model of how Governments should talk to their citizens about this risk. Our national leaders need to work together to start preparing our society to respond. But we need to start now. If and when the pandemic starts, it will be too late.

Hugh White is a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute and professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University.