Egypt, Viral mutations. The Avian Flu

Contributed by Al-Ahram
Sunday, 04 November 2007
Last Updated Sunday, 04 November 2007

The WHO is continuing to warn against the threat posed by Avian Flu. But is anyone listening? The World Health Organisation (WHO) has issued a series of alerts, many specifically directed at developing countries, warning about the ongoing danger posed by the prevalence of Avian Flu, reports Reem Leila.

The warnings coincide with a WHO report revealing that in Vietnam Avian Flu has moved one step closer towards mutating into a strain capable of human to human transmission. However, Egyptian Health Ministry official spokesman, Abdel-Rahman Shahin, disagrees with the report saying the Vietnam mutation "was a result of tests conducted by Vietnamese scientists on a limited number of poultry".According to Zuheir Hallaj, WHO representative and director of communicable disease control, the world remains at high risk from a potential H5N1 pandemic. Egypt, together with other countries which have seen major outbreaks of the disease, is under increasing pressure from the international community to control the spread of the virus among poultry. Hallaj believes that the only way to end the flu virus is to prevent any direct contact between humans and the virus. "People must stop dealing, directly or indirectly, with infected birds," he argues. Despite the limitations of existing models they all indicate, according to Shahin, that national health systems will be able to cope with any potential morbidity and mortality from the disease.Hussein Khalafallah, head of Directorate of Veterinary Medicine (DVM), believes that while the H5N1 bird flu virus has witnessed a further mutation, developing a more virulent poultry infecting strain, it is some way from becoming capable of human to human transmission, though the changes are worrying. Since 2006 there have been 38 recorded cases of the H5N1 Avian Flu virus infecting humans in Egypt. Fifteen of the victims died. Khalafallah points out that while poultry has a body temperature of 106 degrees Fahrenheit humans have an average temperature of 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. The nose and throat, where flu viruses usually enter, is even cooler, at 91.4 degrees Fahrenheit. "While normally bird flu has difficulty developing in the nose or throat of humans this latest mutation allows H5N1 to survive in the cooler temperatures of the human upper respiratory tract."Hamid Samaha, head of the General Authority for Veterinary Services at the Ministry of Agriculture, says the ongoing campaign to combat bird flu has succeeded in reducing the incidence of infection among domestic poultry, with only three sites testing positive in August. While bird flu has been effectively contained some cases continue among home-raised chickens, Shahin told Al-Ahram Weekly. Last week 30 birds were culled in Minya after testing positive. Samples were taken for analysis from people who had been in direct and indirect contact with the bird, none of which recorded positive results. Since the outbreak of bird flu in Egypt in February 2006, 3,645 people have been tested for Avian Flu. The World Bank has granted $7.14 million to Egypt to be used in implementing measures to prevent the spread of Avian Flu and in purchasing equipment necessary to detect the virus and protect health workers. Samaha notes that the financial assistance provided by the World Bank will allow Egypt to improve health security when culling and disposing of infected birds as well as training workers to deal with the virus. In addition to developing a more efficient system to report outbreaks, the funds will allow central laboratory tests in Cairo to meet international standards.