CORRESPONDENCE

Avian influenza: a chance to strengthen agriculture-health links

Sir—We appreciate your Editorial (Jan 24, p 257)* in which you emphasise that “veterinary science and animal husbandry are as important for disease control as clinical medicine”. Strategies to form stronger links between agriculture and human health have been discussed since the late 1980s.∗∗ To improve such connections, we found better coordination between the Ministries of Health and of Agriculture to be critical.

Although inadequate communication between these agencies might be more characteristic of developing countries, this was also a problem in Japan until recently. When a case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) was found in Japan, poor coordination between ministries was considered to be a contributing factor in the failure to prevent the outbreak. Jonathan Watts reported: “bureaucrats in each of these ministries jealously protect their own turf, which means that there has been plenty of finger-pointing but not enough exchange of information between departments.”

Japan learned from the BSE experience and set up a food safety committee in the cabinet office on July 1, 2003, streamlining the information flow between ministries, particularly the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. This close link facilitated a rapid response when avian influenza was found in chickens in Yamaguchi prefecture, Japan, on Jan 11, 2004. Coordination between the two ministries, both at central and local levels, enabled action to be taken within a few days, to protect human health: the husbandry workers in Yamaguchi received immediate medical check-ups; communication between health centres and animal health centres was strengthened; and medical facilities were alerted for possible cases. These measures have so far been successful in controlling the transmission of avian influenza to human beings.

Lipton and de Kadt† noted that agricultural failings cause far greater loss of life in developing countries than in developed countries. Therefore, strengthening the connection between agriculture and health in developing countries is particularly important. Although many of these countries have not experienced BSE, many Asian countries have recently faced avian influenza. Each country is doing its best to curb the spread of the disease, but they should prepare for the next zoonotic disease by strengthening the links between agriculture and health, just as Japan has recently done.

*Sasamine Jimba, Koji Nabae, Susumu Wakai
*Department of International Community Health, Graduate School of Medicine, University of Tokyo, 7-3-1, Hongo, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, 113-0033 Japan (MJ, SW); and Environmental Health Division, Health Service Bureau, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Tokyo, Japan (KN)


Public confusion about treatment effects

Sir—I am not surprised that C A Huntingford (Jan 24, p 332)∗∗ is confused by the striking change in what doctors have told her about the effects of hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Her letter suggests that she might have suspected undeclared commercial interests as helping to explain why for years she was regaled with many purported advantages of HRT. But it seems likely that she and most women are still not sufficiently aware that the medical profession’s remarkable change of tune reflects recent evidence about the effects of HRT derived from randomised experiments, and that this evidence trumps that from the observational data on which prescribers and women have been basing their choices for a couple of decades.∗∗

Lack of public understanding of the distinction between experiment and observation is a substantial handicap when assessing claims about the effects of medical treatments and other interventions in people’s lives. Although some efforts are being made within the science curriculum to help school-children understand the concept of a “fair test”, I have yet not encountered examples of randomised clinical trials being used to illustrate this principle. Likewise, among the larger organisations purporting to educate the public about science, there seems to have been no sustained effort to help people understand the difference between treatment claims based on randomised experiments and those based on observational data, or indeed, on inferences based solely on theory.

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