

FLU & FEAR

Dangerous outbreak of ignorance

By Dave Kotelchuck

The H1N1 virus is now traveling around the world causing flu, mild in many countries but severe in some. During May, hospital officials reported two confirmed deaths in New York City.

But this flu epidemic, originally called swine flu, is more than just a virus causing human harm. As CUNY faculty member Philip Alcabes makes clear in his fine new book *Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fueled Epidemics from the Black Death to Avian Flu* (Philadelphia: Public Affairs Books, 2009), epidemics also give rise to narratives by which human populations try to understand what has happened and seek to make sense of it.

Given the intensity of the discussion in the US recently about immigration from Mexico, it is not surprising that some would use the current flu epidemic, with its apparent origins in Mexico, to blame undocumented immigrants for its spread. For example Jack Cafferty of CNN News said in late April that we should have secured the 2,000 mile border [!!] after 9/11 because of “all these illegal immigrants who we let come in, [some of whom] may have brought this in.”

RUMORS SPREAD

Fox News commentator Michelle Malkin said the outbreak confirmed her past warnings of “the spread of contagious diseases from around the world into the US as a result of uncontrolled immigration” (tinyurl.com/MalkinFlu).

But there is no evidence that the virus was first brought to the US by undocumented immigrants, and it is in fact unlikely. As Ruben Navarrette Jr. noted in the San Diego Union-Tribune, undocumented immigrants tend not to go back and forth across the border: “More often, they stay on this side of the border rather than pay additional smuggling fees or risk their lives trying to re-enter the United States.” And Mexican immigration to this country has now dipped to historically low levels, due to the US economic recession. A more likely suspect, Navarrette said, would be “someone who could travel freely between the countries,” such as a US citizen or legal immigrant. And in fact, the first reported cases in NYC were at St. Francis Preparatory School in Queens, where students had just gone on a spring break trip to Cancún.

AGRIBUSINESS ROLE?

But let’s not kid ourselves, this perception about Mexican immigration bringing swine flu into the US lives on in the minds of many Americans, even if hopefully such opinions are not prevalent in New York City. As Navarrette said in the same article: “Ignorance is infectious.”

What has gotten less attention in public discussion is the possibility that the virus in question might have originated at a giant corporate hog farm. H1N1 virus is known to live and propagate among pigs (hence “swine flu”) and appears to have first crossed over to humans in Mexico, near an industrial-size hog farm (one million animals!) in Veracruz State, owned jointly by the Mexican firm Granjas Carroll and the US-based Smithfield Farms, the largest such company in the world. Residents of the area, like those in North Carolina in the US, had been protesting the stench and disposal of waste for many months. It is also possible that these industrial farms may serve as a “petri dish” for the spread of a cross-species viral infection.

Do we know definitively that the hogs from Smithfield-Granjas Carroll were the source of the virus that appeared to cross over from swine to humans in Mexico? No, we don’t. Only detailed study, which is now going on and will continue for many months into the future, will be able to discern the environmental conditions that may have given rise to this epidemic and allow us to avoid such conditions in the future.

Immigrant-bashing won’t help public health



Nancy Doniger

But we do know that such epidemics will appear again, if not in this form in another. And persistent vigilance as well as continued funding for epidemic surveillance is imperative. We can’t let our guard down, as we did for tuberculosis in the 1970s after the disease appeared to be under

control, only to break out again in the 1980s with renewed virulence.

Unfortunately, while Republican law-makers railed against President Obama’s stimulus bill as laden with “pork,” Karl Rove and Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) argued that an \$870 million allocation for pandemic preparedness should be taken out of the bill – and they succeeded. This cut in the proposed funding came when many state public health departments were already reeling from budget cuts.

Central to fighting such pandemics effectively in the future are a strong public health system and expanded access to health care. If those are missing, people too often leave infections untreated until they are at their most severe. This appears to be what happened in Mexico, contributing to a higher fatality rate there.

NOT JUST A ‘BUG’

Again, as Dr. Alcabes notes in his book *Dread*, “A plague epidemic is not just an illness gone out of control: it is a natural event, one that involves many changes in the environment and whose effects resonate throughout ecosystems. It happens only when the circumstances are aligned just so, when an improbable junction of climate, diet, human social arrangements, animal and insect population dynamics, and the natural movement of germs happens to occur.”

The keys, then, to combating this risk are better understanding and active management of our larger social, physical and biological environment.