

# Issues in Farming: Bird flu

What we need to know to minister effectively

In the words of Corporal Jones, "Don't Panic!!!"

Avian flu has mainly been following the routes of migrating birds and is principally a disease in the wild bird population. It can be passed from wild birds to farm birds. The farm birds most at risk are outdoor free range birds. Those that are enclosed are less at risk.

The disease can pass from birds to humans, typically where humans are living in close contact with the birds (as was the case in Turkey). There is no risk of humans catching the disease from properly cooked chicken (i.e. juices running clear, flesh not pink) or eggs (white solid, not runny). After handling raw chicken or eggs then hands should be washed (as is good kitchen practice after handling any raw meat).

In its current form the disease cannot pass from humans to humans. If someone who already had another form of flu were to also catch avian flu then the two flus might mutate into an entirely new sort of flu. What that entirely new sort of flu would be like is impossible to say. It could be very virulent and kill millions, or it could act as a vaccine so no one ever caught flu again (as cowpox protected milkmaids against smallpox).

If... might... could... The risk to humans is remote. Don't panic.

But panic has occurred. Chicken meat sales in Italy have been reported down 70%. In France following the outbreak in the turkey farm demand dropped 30%. That reduction in demand has put downward pressure on prices in this country at a



Mabel, I can't help thinking you're taking this risk of bird 'flu a bit too seriously!

time when higher gas prices are putting poultry producers heating costs up.

Because the disease is essentially a disease of wild birds and depends on their migration then it is likely that it will be with us for a while. It may mean changes in the way poultry is kept with less being free range and out door and more being indoors where it is possible to exclude disease carrying wild birds. Organic producers are to be allowed to keep their flocks indoors for up to 12 weeks without losing their organic status if circumstances require it. In the longer term we may, as consumers, have to accept less free range and/or organic eggs and chicken as a consequence of having a disease free flock.

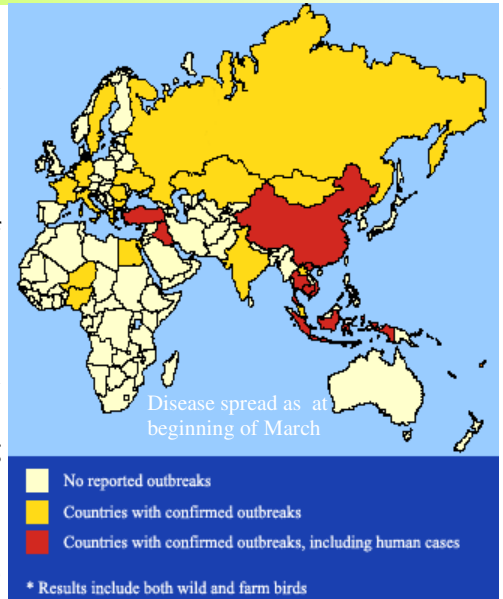
Defra have set up a register of poultry producers and anyone who keeps hens, geese, turkeys... are required to register if they have more than 50 birds. People with less than 50 birds should be encouraged to register so that, if an outbreak occurs, Defra can have some idea of where it might spread. Advice from Defra focuses on prevention of the disease by trying to keep domestic birds and wild birds separate.

At the moment the Government's preferred strategy for controlling any outbreak is by culling affected flocks. The view of Sir David King (Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government) is that vaccination of poultry against the disease is likely to be ineffective and could result in apparently healthy birds becoming carriers of the disease.

So what can and should churches and their members do?

First of all, keep a sense of proportion and don't panic. The total number of deaths world wide from avian flu is still only measured in hundreds. "Ordinary" flu (particularly if it leads to

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bronchitis or pneumonia) is a far bigger killer. Don't waste money on dubious offers of "vaccines". No one knows what a human strain of bird flu would be, so no one can produce a vaccine!



Secondly continue eating chicken and eggs. Follow proper hygiene procedures. (Most food related illness in the UK comes from poor practice in domestic kitchens). Look for the British Farm Standard's Little Red Tractor logo. If we believe that dumping unrealistically priced EU produce in the developing world is unfair to third world farmers, then dumping cheap EU chicken meat on UK markets is unfair on UK farmers.

Thirdly, if there are people keeping a few birds in their gardens for eggs for their households, then encourage them to register.

Fourthly, be aware of the pressures that poultry producers and their suppliers are under. Co-operate with any request they make in respect of biosecurity. Be prepared to listen to producers and give them that most precious commodity — your time.

"Prices are down about 4%, volume of sales down about 15%"  
Worcestershire broiler producer

"There's no easy way to deal with fear"  
Worcestershire egg producer