

Bird flu vaccine rationing proposal favors youth

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By Maggie Fox

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Teens and young adults should be the first vaccinated against bird flu, after health care workers who would deliver the vaccine and specialists involved in making it, two medical ethicists said on Thursday.

They said current U.S. policy for the seasonal influenza vaccine, which puts the elderly and young children first, would not be the best approach in case of an influenza pandemic.

"If we have the pandemic flu, we are not going to have enough vaccine and we are going to have to make tough allocation and rationing decisions," said Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel of the National Institutes of Health.

"We definitely think this is a better approach. This is not just an armchair ivory tower philosophy. We think this is a justifiable approach," Emanuel added in a telephone interview.

Emanuel and Alan Wertheimer, both of the NIH Clinical Center, wrote a commentary in the journal *Science* suggesting a combination of two widely accepted approaches to allocating scarce resources in case of a flu pandemic.

"Almost everyone agrees that people who are going to treat other people with influenza and people who are going to give the vaccine out should get first priority because they are going to save other peoples' lives," Emanuel said.

"Who is next? The recommendations to HHS (the U.S. Health and Human Services Department) is that those people at highest risk of dying should be next and those people turn out to be those over 65," Emanuel added. "That seems unjustifiable in my opinion."

The H5N1 avian influenza virus does not easily infect people yet. It has swept across much of Europe and Asia in birds, has infected more than 200 people and killed 115 of them.

The danger of a pandemic comes if it evolves into a form that people can pass easily to others. Because it is a new virus, it could kill tens or hundreds of millions in the space of a few weeks or months.

'WE HAVE TO HAVE A PUBLIC DEBATE'

A vaccine is the best defense but a perfect vaccine could not be formulated until after the strain actually appeared. And using current methods, it takes months to manufacture a flu vaccine.

Even at full capacity, all the influenza vaccine plants in the world can only produce 900 million doses a year. Experiments suggest that an H5N1 vaccine would take a higher dose than the annual flu vaccine to work, meaning even fewer would be available.

So there would have to be rationing. The current U.S. pandemic flu plan does not spell out who should be first in line for the shots.

"We have to have a public debate about this," Emanuel said.

"Death seems more tragic when a child or young adult dies than an elderly person -- not because the lives of older people are less valuable, but because the younger person has not had the opportunity to live and develop through all stages of life," Emanuel and Wertheimer wrote.

But one approach balances how many years left a person can reasonably expect with how many years have already been invested.

"Within this framework, 20-year-olds are valued more than 1-year-olds because the older individuals have more developed interests, hopes and plans but have not had the opportunity to realize them," they wrote.

Combining this approach with the common-sense idea that people who make, distribute and deliver vaccines need to be kept healthy may be the best idea of all, they argued. This would emphasize people aged between 13 and 40 - precisely those most likely to have died during the 1918 pandemic.

Therefore, this approach could also save the most lives overall, they said.

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