

Letter

Reaction to the threat of influenza pandemic: the mass media and the public

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During the past few months we witnessed two phases in the reaction of the public in Greece to the threat of an influenza pandemic. Initially, during October 2005, practically all mass media in the country devoted extensive time to the coverage of various aspects of the outbreak of avian influenza. An overflow of information from the media targeted the general public who did not have prior knowledge of this type of influenza and who were not aware of the possibility of such a pandemic. The psychological impact to the public that was caused by the media was intense. The reaction of the public for self-preservation under this psychological condition was to rely on the immediate use of influenza vaccine. As a result, more than one million influenza vaccine doses were sold, mainly over the counter; people were vaccinated without risk assessment or without priority being given to those more vulnerable to influenza. This led to a situation where a considerable number of people who are in need of the influenza vaccine, including the elderly and immunocompromised patients, are deprived of the availability of the vaccine.

Surprisingly, after the overwhelming coverage of the possibility of an influenza pandemic from the media during October 2005, the follow-up on the issue was almost complete silence during November and December 2005 (this manuscript was written prior to the occurrence of human cases of avian influenza in Turkey in January 2006). The alarmed state was replaced by a silence of equivalent intensity and the public was left with the impression that the possibility of influenza pandemic crisis was over. This phenomenon, namely the initial over-reaction and subsequently the under-reaction of the public, was probably not unique to Greece; instead, we believe that a similar sequence of events related to the threat of influenza pandemic occurred in many other countries.

Important conclusions may be derived from this experience that may become a classic example for the mass media to

avoid in the coverage of public health risks [1,2]. We believe that public health agencies should have operational plans towards the delivery of information to the public that are promptly implemented. They should make use of all types of mass media in a timely manner, before the media presents potentially unfiltered information to the public regarding a health-related risk such as the influenza pandemic.

Effective risk communication is a priority early in an outbreak. Both the mass media and public health authorities have the responsibility to deliver correct information to the public. The fear-based approach and over-reaction towards a potential influenza pandemic may be hazardous to the general public, because it encourages solutions that inhibit the ability to properly respond to a potential pandemic.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed to the writing of the manuscript and approved its final version.

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