

# Editorial

## Attack of the Killer Flu!

Presumably, it's a matter of natural selection. Cave folk whose attention wasn't immediately grabbed by sex, violence and death didn't have babies and were eaten by predators. But even if our interests are predictable, our reactions may not be.

Last year, Australian government censors initially sanctioned a violent computer game but subsequently banned it. The reappraisal was prompted by an internet patch allowing characters to woo each other and then have consensual sex.

Murder is the norm for gamers but simulated mating just isn't on. In the battle for social health: Killing 1: Courting 0.

National priorities were further clarified this year. In February, we became the only country in the world to ban a computer game because players could paint graffiti complaining about government repression. An errant generation of anarchists was nipped in the bud.

Danger and death interest us. It's no accident that the world's media loved severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) a few years ago and is excited about bird flu now. Unfortunately for the intensively-farmed poultry within which bird flu gets hotheaded, the media finds vegetarianism less exciting.

At time of writing, the H5N1 avian influenza virus is thought to have killed about 130 people worldwide since 1997. Over the same period, roughly ten million people have died in road accidents—without causing the end-of-civilisation-as-we-know-it.

Seat belts haven't been a high-priority for US governments but George W Bush had no problem earmarking USD\$1.4 billion for bird flu antivirals. This stockpile might perhaps eventually prove useful—but the drugs' practical effectiveness at preventing and treating the disease during an outbreak is widely doubted.

The pharmaceutical most widely stockpiled around the world to combat a bird flu pandemic is oseltamivir (Tamiflu). At standard doses it's been found to incompletely suppress viral replication in some H5N1 influenza patients [1]. This renders therapy ineffective and increases the risk of resistance.

Sir Liam Donaldson, England's chief medical officer, believes doctors have little idea how effective or otherwise oseltamivir antiviral tablets would actually be during a pandemic [2].

A more definitive conclusion has been reached by Nguyen Tuong Van, the head of the intensive care unit of the Center for Tropical Diseases in Hanoi, Vietnam. After following WHO protocols in treating 41 victims of H5N1 flu virus, he thinks the drug is "useless"[3].

Interestingly, Bush's Secretary for Defense Donald Rumsfeld is reported to be making millions from the rise and rise of the anti-flu drug oseltamivir. Rumsfeld is a former chairman of, and remains a large shareholder in, Gilead Sciences—the rightsholder of the Tamiflu patent.

US federal disclosure forms indicate that Rumsfeld owns between USD\$5 million and USD\$25 million in Gilead stock [4]. The rise in Gilead's share price from USD\$35 to USD\$57 per share will therefore have added between USD\$2.5 million to USD\$15.5 million to Rumsfeld's net worth.

It's estimated that about 35,000 people die in the USA from influenza each year. To date, it appears that H5N1 avian influenza's contribution to that total is zero. With luck, that will never change.

An American did, however, die from an animal influenza back in 1976. Nineteen-year-old army recruit David Lewis told his drill instructor at Fort Dix that he felt tired and weak but not sick enough to see military medics. Within 24 hours, he was dead.

Following his death, the fear of a swine flu pandemic resulted in a now-notorious mass vaccination program. Before the program was cancelled, about a quarter of the US population was immunised and the vaccine caused hundreds of cases of Guillain-Barré syndrome and the deaths of about 25 people [5].

Lewis turned out to be the only fatality of swine flu itself. Oops.

*Andrew Gunn 17 June 2006*

### References

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