To: Dr Simon Edwards
Secretariat, Royal Society/Academy of Medical Sciences pandemic influenza study
London

Dear Dr Edwards,

Your letter to the Director-General of FAO, dated 2 March 2006, on the Royal Society/Academy of Medical Sciences study on pandemic influenza refers. We welcome and fully agree with the pertinence of the study proposal. In due course we may be able to provide more substantive comments. At this stage, due to the current very substantial commitments we are facing in the support of HPAI affected countries, we limit our comment to one single issue.

The magnitude and imminence of pandemic influenza is rather unquantifiable which should perhaps have been, or may still be, subject of major scientific attention. Knowing the threat is obviously beneficial to governments when developing strategies and planning contingencies. Whilst academia may have contributed to tackle this difficult subject matter, there has been limited progress. Meanwhile, policy development has largely been centred around the fact that a pandemic is probably imminent and may well cause millions of people to die. While this may be true we are uncertain about it, and policies could have been elaborated for scenarios of identical probability but for different assumptions with regard to pandemic imminence and severity.

As a result of these policies placing emphasis on an imminent pandemic governments have started investing, at significant scale, in antiviral and vaccine development. In doing so, little attention has gone to the options to fight virus circulation at source, in animals. Only gradually did this option gain recognition. When coupled to the notion that science informs us that a pandemic virus will take some time still to evolve, the inescapable conclusion is that a lot of valuable time may have been lost.

The development during the first few months of 2006 comprises human infections in Turkey, the novel spread of infection in humans and poultry to Africa and western Europe, further spread of the virus in the Black and Baltic Sea basins, human cases in Azerbaijan, the disease expanding into the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and re-emergence of disease in poultry and humans in Southeast Asia.

It appears that science has only partially been applied in policy development and contingency planning. We in FAO would be grateful if this were given attention.

Yours sincerely,

Samuel Jutzi
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