

**WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES
COMMITTEE BY SENATOR L. NORMAN**

ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON TUESDAY 15th MARCH 2005

Question

The World Health Organisation has warned that 'the world is now in the gravest possible danger of a pandemic' stemming from avian influenza, commonly known as bird flu. Would the President advise members of the arrangements, if any, the Committee has made to protect the local population?

Answer

The Health and Social Services Committee has been following the developments around Avian Flu in South East Asia with concern.

Avian Flu is a close relative of the human influenza virus but, whilst it has been a significant economic problem for poultry farmers around the world for more than a century, it is only in the past year that the avian flu virus has jumped from birds to humans. Around 60 cases have so far been reported in South East Asia and around 43 of those have died. This is a far higher death rate than ordinary flu, and the deaths are in otherwise healthy children and adults and not the elderly or otherwise vulnerable groups.

At the same time, the World Health Organisation is concerned that the normal behaviour of the flu virus means we are due a flu pandemic in the next few years, and if there was some kind of genetic combination of avian flu and ordinary flu in South East Asia, then that pandemic would be even more dangerous than otherwise. The World Health Organisation (WHO) is concerned that the world is poorly prepared for such a pandemic and that planning should start now.

The single most important preventive measure is vaccination. However, the quickly changing nature of the flu virus means that adjustments need to be made annually to the make up of the routine vaccine. Vaccine manufacturers around the world are now geared up to work together to ensure the fastest possible manufacture, license and distribution of the vaccine properly 'tuned' to any pandemic virus. However, this will take some three months to become available.

Over recent years, a small range of anti-viral drugs has become available with some activity against the flu virus. Whilst not as effective as antibiotics against bacterial disease, they offer some reduction in the probability of catching flu, and making flu less dangerous if caught.

Jersey had already taken the decision to order a stock of oseltamivir, likely to be the most useful of the drugs available, when the U.K. Department of Health and the Health Protection Agency announced a plan for the U.K. Our plans will now be guided by this expert advice.

We will have 25,000 courses of oseltamivir on the Island by the end of April 2005, and the Health and Social Services Emergency Planning Group is developing plans for the distribution of the drugs and the management of any pandemic that threatens Jersey. The U.K. is stocking up to similar levels over two years. We are watching the advice from WHO and U.K. authorities as this changes as the situation develops.

As yet, there is no flu pandemic, nor any threat to Jersey from Avian Flu. It would be sensible for Jersey visitors to South East Asia to keep away from live poultry or bird markets. There is no risk from chicken meat on sale in Jersey as import from affected areas is banned, the risk from food is low and the virus is destroyed by cooking.