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Hong Kong

Poultry

New Strain of Bird Flu Detected in Humans

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Report Highlights:

On April 7, 1999, the Hong Kong Department of Health announced that its Virus Unit recently had isolated a new strain of influenza A virus (H9N2) from two patients. This was the first time that the H9N2 virus, an avian influenza virus, has been isolated from humans in Hong Kong.

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On April 7, 1999, the Hong Kong Department of Health announced that its Virus Unit recently had isolated a new strain of influenza A virus (H9N2) from two patients. This was the first time that the H9N2 virus, an avian influenza virus, has been isolated from humans in Hong Kong. The two patients, girls aged one and four, recovered fully from influenza-like illnesses in March 1999. Detailed investigations are underway to find out how the patients contracted the virus.

The discovery of a new strain of bird flu will inevitably raise concerns. With memories of last year's outbreak still fresh in most people's minds, it will be hard to avoid some degree of public anxiety. As might be expected, the public has responded rapidly to the news.

Live Chicken Market

The retail market for live chickens dropped over 70 percent on April 8, the day after the bird flu news was released to the public. Hong Kong imports around 80,000 to 100,000 chickens from China every day. The wholesale price is around HKD10 per catty (USD2 per kg). On April 8, the wholesale price dropped 30 percent to HKD7 per catty (USD1.5 per kg), and the wholesale volume contracted 30 percent. About 20,000 chickens were unsold in the wholesale market.

At the retail level, retailers complained that business slid 70 percent in terms of volume, coupled with a drop in retail prices. Ordinarily, the retail price of live chickens in wet markets is around HKD12 per catty (USD2.60 per kg). The bird flu scare brought down the retail price to HKD10 per catty (USD2 per kg), representing a drop of 20 percent.

Government Response

Ever since the bird flu incident in 1998, the Hong Kong Agriculture and Fisheries Department has implemented strict inspection guidelines, testing live poultry for H5 virus at import control points and at local farms. The department has conducted serological testing to screen out birds that tested positive to H5. Testings for H9 have not been conducted.

However, as part of the influenza surveillance program, AFD has been sampling imported and local chickens, geese and ducks for influenza viruses. Since December 1997, they have isolated H9 viruses from 24 samples, some from local farms, retail stalls and the wholesale market.

In light of the new bird flu incident, Hong Kong academics have called for testing for H9 viruses in poultry at import control points and local farms. The AFD responded that influenza A H9 viruses are commonly found in poultry. A wide variety of birds including chickens, ducks, and geese may have been exposed to them and developed antibodies. Since most birds are likely to be positive to the virus to various degrees, serological testing will not be able to differentiate birds that are actively passing the virus.

Meanwhile, the government is conducting a round of inspections of all fresh provision shops and market poultry stalls to ensure that they are complying with necessary hygiene standards. All poultry operators are advised to enhance clean-up operations of their premises.

Effects

At this stage, it is difficult to assess the impact of this incident on US poultry in Hong Kong. It depends very much on the future course of this development. If there are no new bird flu cases detected in the future, business will be back to normal very soon as Hong Kong people have gotten used to food safety problems. However, if new cases continue to be found and if some have fatal results, the poultry business will certainly be adversely affected.

The bird flu incident in 1998 resulted in centralized slaughtering of ducks and geese. However, the slaughter of chickens is still allowed in various retail outlets. This round of bird flu will pressure the government to reconsider the possibility of centralizing chicken slaughter for hygienic reasons. The government has been very hesitant in implementing a centralized chicken slaughter policy because it runs against the traditional diet habit of Chinese. Additionally, it would cause many people to lose jobs. The government currently lacks the popular support to initiate such big changes. But another round of bird flu scare will provide the government with a golden opportunity to adopt such changes.

A centralized slaughter policy would benefit US poultry. When there are no live chickens available in the market, US poultry will become more competitive. At present, US poultry is disadvantaged because of the popularity of live chickens among local consumers, leaving US poultry totally absent from this niche market. The elimination of live chicken supplies would greatly enhance the competitiveness of US poultry. Nonetheless, the Hong Kong government has to overcome big obstacles before it can implement the centralized slaughter chicken policy.