

The greatest threat to the City of London?



The furore caused by events like 9/11 and 7/7 understandably places counter-terrorism at the top of the political agenda, but corporate bosses should be paying just as much attention when it comes to planning for a potential flu pandemic. **Barry Dawson**



explains why in kick-starting Security Management Today's latest Editorial Campaign in tandem with Advance Security. Photographs courtesy of Jason Bye/Fotoshoot/Alamy Images

WITH TERRORISM AN EVER-PRESENT AND frightening concern, you'd be forgiven for thinking that a bomb attack is the greatest threat currently facing the City of London... but you would be wrong.

Instead, the heads of business sitting in our Capital's Boardrooms – and, indeed, those across the UK – should be more worried about pandemic flu. It may not be as tangible a threat as terrorism, but should a virulent virus hit our shores then it would affect many times more people than would a terrorist attack.

As a solutions provider in the private sector, what's interesting for us is that responsibility for setting policy to deal with the threat of pandemic flu is falling to the security industry.

Given all of the media hype surrounding the issue, it's important right from the outset to be realistic about the risks. The word from the experts isn't that reassuring. We're told by the World Health Organisation – and other experts on health – that if a pandemic flu virus strikes the Far East, within three weeks it would arrive in the UK. Indeed, estimates suggest that even if 99.9% of global air travel was halted, the virus would only be delayed from hitting our shores by two months. Plenty of time to develop a suitable anti-virus, you might think, but with pandemic flu typically very quick to mutate, this is unlikely to hold it off for too long.

A matter of 'When', not 'If'...

The current risk has arisen from the H5N1 bird flu virus, which has transferred in around 300 cases worldwide from birds to humans (typically where the people involved have been in close contact with infected poultry).

The worry is that this virus will combine with a human flu virus and mutate into a virulent pandemic. Experts are now saying that it's a matter of when, not if, this will happen.

The last flu pandemic to hit the UK – back in 1968-1969 – caused 50,000 deaths. With these viruses typically occurring every 30 years, we're now long overdue.

Pandemic flu: Q&A for security directors of corporate organisations

Q: What is pandemic flu?

A: Flu that spreads rapidly causing widespread epidemics around the world. Pandemic flu occurs when a new, highly infectious and dangerous strain of the influenza virus appears. In contrast to the 'ordinary' or 'seasonal' flu outbreaks which we see every winter in the UK, flu pandemics occur infrequently (usually every few decades). The most serious was in 1918, killing millions of people worldwide. Smaller pandemics happened in 1957 and 1968.

Q: Are we at risk right now?

A: A pandemic can start when three conditions have been met: (1) a new influenza virus sub-type emerges (2) it infects humans, causing serious illness and (3) it spreads easily and sustainably among humans.

The H5N1 virus meets the first two conditions, and it's likely that nobody will have immunity should an H5N1-like pandemic virus emerge. The H5N1 virus has not yet demonstrated an ability to pass easily between people. However, the virus is currently passing from birds to humans so it could develop the ability to move easily between people at some point.

Q: Is another influenza pandemic likely?

A: Flu viruses are constantly changing and adapting, so it's likely that viruses sufficiently different from 'ordinary' flu strains to cause a pandemic will emerge from time to time. International disease experts are saying that the world is overdue for the next pandemic.

Q: What alert level are we at during the present time?

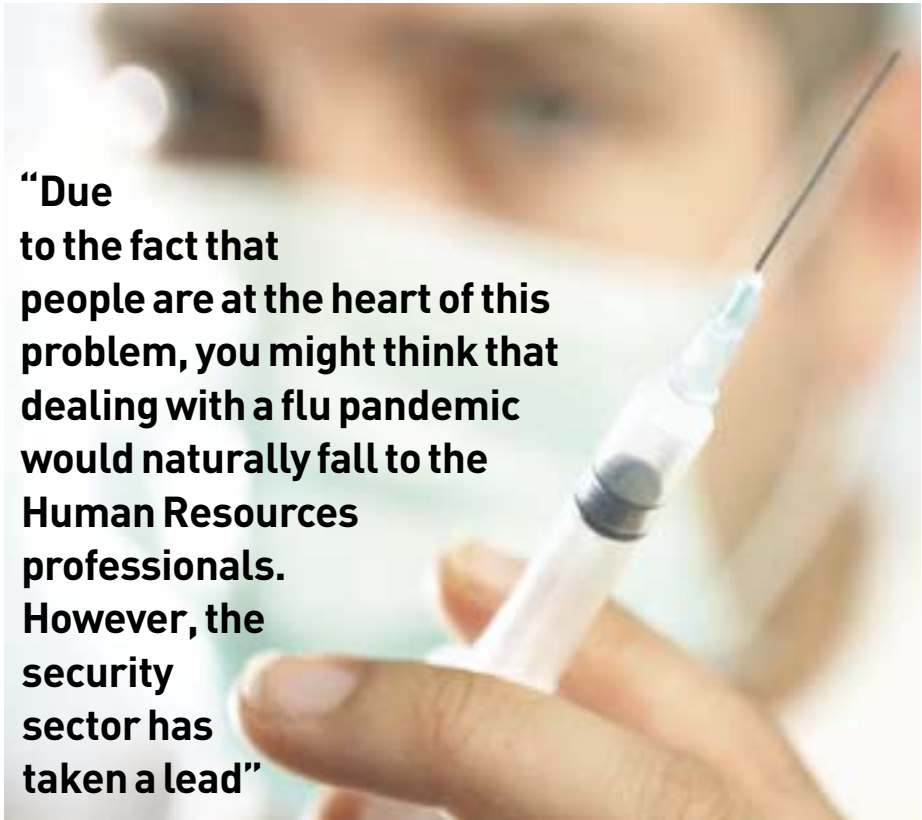
A: The World Health Organisation has developed an alert system to help inform the world about the current threat of a pandemic emerging. The alert system has six phases, with Phase 1 having the lowest risk of human cases and Phase 6 posing the greatest risk of pandemic. The world is presently in Phase 3 of the so-called 'Pandemic Alert'. This means that there's a new influenza virus sub-type causing disease in humans, but that it's not yet spreading in an efficient (in other words easily transmittable) and sustainable manner.

Q: Can the potential pandemic be prevented at any stage?

A: International effort will be put into trying to control a pandemic when it emerges. The World Health Organisation has stockpiled large supplies of anti-virals. ■

■ Further information can be found on the Internet at: www.dh.gov.uk/en/PandemicFlu





“Due to the fact that people are at the heart of this problem, you might think that dealing with a flu pandemic would naturally fall to the Human Resources professionals. However, the security sector has taken a lead”

In a worse case scenario, the World Health Organisation estimates that a pandemic flu virus could kill up to 250,000 people in the UK alone, and may well strike up to one third of the UK’s entire workforce at any one time.

You might feel that this isn’t too bad. Little worse than an average week in the summer when plenty of your staff are on holiday, but think about it... With estimates of a three-to-four month lifespan for each wave, if this one third of the workforce includes your supply chain, your distribution routes and your customers – in addition to your own members of staff – it could have a huge impact on the business. What’s more, if it includes your security staff, the entire front line of your

organisation would become vulnerable, thereby impacting on 100% of your business.

The security sector has taken a lead on driving the mitigation strategy because its main role is to protect and deal with risk.

Preparing operational plans

At Advance Security, we have already prepared operational plans for a number of our national clients, all of them bespoke to their individual industries, supply chains and staff requirements. We offer them advice on planning for a pandemic internally, and agree exactly on how we intend to mobilise our staff during an outbreak in order to protect their businesses as soundly as possible.

Of course, we’re not infallible. If a pandemic strikes, a third of our own workforce could be hit. Persuading those who aren’t affected to protect businesses which have experienced severe levels of illness among their staff will be difficult to say the least. What we can do, though, is plan ahead and provide our clients with some peace of mind that their premises and people will be protected.

Some major corporate organisations are very well aware of the risk and have duly placed great importance on planning ahead. The financial sector has been extremely quick to take a lead, with HSBC in particular widely cited in the national and international news media for its proactive approach.

In the retail and distribution sectors, some of the bigger players have taken their planning a stage further, developing strategies that lock their suppliers into continuing to supply them during a pandemic when resources will be tight and rivals continually vying for extra support.

Putting measures in place

However, there is very little planning taking place at the next tier down in the chain, and at the small business level. Many organisations simply don’t have the resources to ask the security industry to develop an operational plan that will deal with the threat.

That said, there are simple measures that can be put in place now to prepare for the potential impact. Thinking about keeping premises hygienic at all times, preparing transport plans to ferry staff to and from work or looking into flexible hours and home working, for example, could all help should the threat materialise.

We wish that businesses would respond to the media coverage of the pandemic flu threat in the same way they do terrorist attacks. With business continuity such a key watchword for modern commerce, an attitude of: “We’ll deal with it when it happens” will not suffice. ■

■ **Barry Dawson is managing director of Advance Security**
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The Pandemic Plan: how does the UK propose to respond?

Q: What contingency plans does the UK have in place for fighting pandemic flu?

A: The UK was one of the first countries to have a pandemic plan in place. This was revised and reissued on 19 October 2005. The plan provides the overall framework for an integrated UK-wide response, escalating as the pandemic threat increases and then as the pandemic evolves. At its simplest, it covers actions to be taken before, during and after the pandemic.

The UK Influenza Pandemic Contingency Plan has been revised. The revised version has a broader scope than just the health response and covers wider areas of national planning. The revised plan is also a strategic framework, directing users to specific guidance documents where relevant.

Q: What would we do if pandemic flu arrives?

A: If a pandemic started outside the UK, the Government would already have put its contingency plan into action and started preparing for the

pandemic in the UK. A graduated series of public health measures would be implemented to reduce the impact and, thereafter, help control the pandemic.

Q: How will a pandemic impact upon businesses?

A: Work is being carried out across Government to engage essential services and encourage them to develop robust business continuity plans appropriate for a flu pandemic. The Department of Health is also working with representatives of business such as the Confederation of British Industry and the British Chambers of Commerce through the Cabinet Office Business Forum to ensure they have the information they need to plan for the impact of a pandemic on their business.

Further information relating to business continuity planning can be found in Annex J of the UK Influenza Pandemic Contingency Plan (available at: www.dh.gov.uk/en/PandemicFlu). Guidance on planning for pandemic flu was also published in February 2006 by the Cabinet Office. This can be found at www.ukresilience.info, which also provides general information regarding contingency planning for businesses. Importantly, a useful checklist for business continuity planning can also be found on this website. ■