



**World Health
Organization**

**Transcript of virtual press conference with
Gregory Hartl, WHO Spokesperson for Epidemic and Pandemic Diseases,
and Dr Peter Ben Embarek, WHO Food Safety Scientist,
World Health Organization
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Gregory Hartl: Thank you very much for joining us today for our regular 5:00 pm daily press briefing. Just before I hand you over to Dr Peter Ben Embarek who is a scientist in our Food Safety Programme, I will remind you that we are still at Phase 5, and as of today, based on this morning's numbers, we have 787 confirmed cases coming from 17 countries.

Dr Ben Embarek: Good afternoon, good morning. Yesterday the Canadian Food Safety Inspection Agency had announced that they had found the influenza A(H1N1) virus in a swine herd in Alberta and it is believed that this herd was infected through a farm worker who had been travelling to Mexico and on his return he worked on the farm and probably infected the animals. It happened on the 12th and 14th of April, and about 18 days later the swine started to show symptoms. They are all now recovering, including the farm worker, and it appears that the disease is also showing a mild form in the animals. It is not a big surprise. I must say that we suspected that at some point, since this virus has swine virus elements, that we would find possibly the virus in swine or pigs in the region where the virus is circulating. It is also clear and necessary to re-emphasize that this is not a food-borne disease. You do not get this disease through eating pork and therefore, there is no reason to be afraid of consuming pork or pork products. And as long as pork is cooked the way we normally cook meat, there is no problem and no risk at all to getting this disease. From an animal health point of view, it is still a mild disease, swine influenza is very common in pigs and, of course, from a public health point of view it is important to understand how the disease is present in animals because we also need to recommend and take measures to prevent further human exposure to sick animals. Because there is of course a risk for those heavily involved, or in close contact, with sick animals to get infected. It happens as with other diseases and it has happened in the past with classical swine influenza where on certain occasions, in particular workers on farms who are heavily exposed to these animals have been infected this way. This could, of course, happen here so we have to take measures to avoid unnecessary exposure of humans to sick animals.

André Picard, Canada: Thank you. I would like to ask you more detail about this swine flu infections in Canada. We know the person is better, the pigs are better, but is there not a risk in this mixing of pig and person influenza? Doesn't it risk getting worse and going back into the population as a more severe and dangerous strain?

Dr Ben Embarek: The way I understood the question, you are asking if there is an increased risk of having the virus circulating back and forth between humans and animals? The virus that has been isolated from swine in this event yesterday, does not seem to be different from the one circulating among humans. There is no sign that it has changed at all. But this could of course happen like with any other influenza virus. As you know they

change all the time and it could really be the case that, by moving in the swine population, it would again change. But we cannot anticipate this and it is therefore important to continue to monitor the situation, study the different viruses we isolate, and increase our surveillance both in humans and in animals in order to better follow any possible change in the future.

Gregory Hartl: Before we move to the next question, I would just like to add and to emphasize that as an influenza virus changes, it can become both more or less severe, or stay the same. So it could happen with further changes that the virus becomes less severe. We don't know at this point.

Steve Connor, The Independent: Yes, it's about the potential movement from Phase 5 to Phase 6. As far as I understand, for Phase 6 we need sustained transmission in at least two WHO Regions. We have a sustained transmission in the Americas and at the current rate at which we are seeing the increase of transmission, when do you think we are likely to go to Phase 6?

Gregory Hartl: That is not very easy to predict because transmission of influenza virus or any virus for that matter does not necessarily always move with the same speed. There could be a hiatus in its spread, especially we have not seen any confirmed instances of sustained human transmission in communities outside of the Americas. We don't know when that will happen. Certainly we will remain on alert in case that happens. But it would not be prudent to try to make a prediction in that regard. We would almost inevitably have to say we were wrong next week.

Saki Ouchi, Japanese broadcast: Are there any plans for the Emergency Committee to be held in the near future? And when Dr Ben Embarek mentioned the need of taking the necessary measures, are you indicating maybe slaughtering the swine at any point? There have been cases of slaughtering swine in Egypt because of maybe unscientific rumours. What would you say to those in less developed countries who may not be able to get information as rapidly as the more developed countries?

Dr Ben Embarek: There is at present no particular recommendation to cull any pigs anywhere in the world. Normally, FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) and OIE (World Organisation for Animal Health) are our two sister organizations in charge of recommending specific control measures to deal with diseases in the animal population. From a public health point of view, and looking back in the past at other new diseases appearing where animal and humans were infected, there are always different ways of dealing with these diseases. You can either start vaccinating the animals in a particular area, you can also decide to cull the affected herds in an attempt to limit the spread of the disease, or you can increase biosecurity measures to make sure that nothing comes in or out of that particular farm. These are the main measures that are normally being used to deal with these types of new diseases. And we saw that these three types of measures were used and are being used, for example, in dealing with avian influenza outbreaks in poultry in many parts of the world over the past four or five years. Some have worked in some areas, and some others have worked in other areas, some countries have taken a combination of these measures to deal with the disease, depending on national situations, national specific environment, national differences in terms of how you raise animals and how you interact between humans and animals. But in our particular case here, there is at present no recommendation for culling and I know that FAO and OIE are recommending increased biosecurity measures for the time being. But from a public health point of view we are also following the situation and we also have to better understand how the disease dynamic goes

in the animal population to better assess how humans could be affected, or at risk for further transmission and whether there is a need for taking more drastic measures. There are also ongoing inoculation experiments, at least in two laboratories, where they are inoculating the virus in pigs to give us a better indication of how the disease affects pigs and that will help us design more appropriate, more specific control measures in order to protect human health.

Gregory Hartl: Regarding your other questions, no, there is no further meeting scheduled.

Richard Knox, NPR: Two things if I may. A little while ago on television Secretary Napolitano of our Homeland Security Agency said that she expects that there will be an elevation to level 6 and she said it could very well be this week. If possible, could you spell out what that would trigger when and if it happens? Secondly, would the Emergency Committee be reconvened before such a decision is taken? Secondly there have been a couple of confirmed reports in the past couple of days from Costa Rica and Colombia about cases in Central and South America. Could you sum up what you know about these cases and what you are doing to track southern hemisphere appearances of this virus?

Gregory Hartl: Now first of all for us going to Phase 6, if and when we do, implies that we would help our Member States, especially those Member States that are not as well off as others, to increase a range of activities in terms of clinical infection control and clinical treatment of cases, in terms of surveillance to try to pick up unusual disease events, in terms of diagnostics to be able to better and more quickly diagnose cases as they come. We would also be shipping materials and medicines such as oseltamivir. So there is a range of very specific things that we would do both ourselves and in support of national ministries of Health. We are of course aware of certainly the case in Costa Rica has been confirmed to us and we are actively following up reports and any other instances of other cases that we hear of in Latin America and elsewhere around the world.

Jamil Chadai, Sao Paulo. Could explain why is it that WHO insists that embargos on pork meat is not recommended and actually that trade can go on, and eating can go on, if you just said that you are actually studying the effects. How is it that you are 100 percent sure that it is not going to be a problem? Yesterday night we got a press release from WTO about this issue. How does WTO know whether pork is safe or not, and could you please explain to us if there will be a scientific meeting tomorrow. If that is true or not and if so, what will they deal with.

Dr Ben Embarek: First on the food safety part: influenza viruses have many features and some of them, in particular in relation to the way they transmit to humans or animals, change as we know very often. But, from all the studies that have been done with influenza viruses, whether it is avian influenza viruses, human viruses or swine viruses, they all seem to have more or less the same characteristics in terms of their heat resistance for example. And we know that they are not very resistant to heat, meaning as soon as you cook a product that may contain these viruses, they will get inactivated. So consuming fully cooked or well cooked products, whether we are talking about this virus in pork or avian influenza virus in chicken, there is no risk of getting infected that way. Where we are concerned is if the virus is present in the live animals, then the people who are handling these animals, we are talking about farm workers, about veterinarians, about slaughter house workers, those might be at a higher risk because they come in close contact with the animals, they come in close contact with the body fluids of the animals, and that is how you could get infected. We know that with other animal influenza viruses – again looking at avian influenza or other traditional swine influenza viruses – there has been instances where

people have been infected through handling the live animal or slaughtering it but these are all the steps before preparing or before trading it or using it for food. So it is the early part of the food chain where you might have a risk of transmission with this close contact to body fluids. But at the other end, at the consumer end, we know that there is virtually no risk because you don't get in contact with these fluids, you get in contact with the meat, which is either free of the virus or the virus will get inactivated during any processing you undertake with the product. So from a consumer point of view, there is absolutely no risk of consuming cooked products. And therefore we say that trading meat for example, whether processed or raw or frozen meat, should not be restricted because there is virtually no risk of transmission that way. We have to send these different messages, that you might have a risk with the live animals, or when slaughtering them, but on the other side, as soon as you are dealing with the final product, there is no big risk. It was easier somehow with bird flu and the chicken because there it was clear that when you buy a chicken wrapped-up in the supermarket, it is easy to cook and you don't get exposed to anything. But if you are sitting in a farm and do your own home slaughtering somewhere in rural Asia, you are of course exposed to a totally different environment. And this is a similar situation that we might see here.

Gregory Hartl: Scientific Committee will be looking at various elements of what we know and don't know about the A(H1N1) virus. If we can make any appreciation of incubation periods, of severity or not, or mildness of the virus, which groups might be most vulnerable, etc. That will be what it's looking at.

Mark Anderson, The Times: Two questions: first of all, there are reports coming out now, at this moment really, from the Mexican Health Minister, saying that the epidemic is in the phase of decline, the national peak was between 23 April and 28 April. Do you have anything to say to that? And secondly, how concerned are you about the ongoing situation in Spain, where the number of confirmed cases has been doubled to 40 today? I understand most of those are Mexican contacts, that is, does the presence of so many cases in one country enhance the prospect of human-to-human transmission?

Gregory Hartl: That might be certainly what the current epidemiology is showing. I also would like to remind people that in 1918, the Spanish flu showed a surge in the spring, and then disappeared in the summer months, only to return in the autumn of 1918 with a vengeance, and we know that that killed eventually 40 to 50 million people. So, I think while tracing these kind of curves of activity – increase and decrease in activity – we cannot lower our guard. There is a high possibility that this virus will come back, especially in colder periods. Mexico is in the northern hemisphere, we are entering in the summer months where normally the influenza activity is low, so I think we would want to wait a while before making a definitive decision. But certainly maybe this current round of activity has peaked, but we are really normally ten days into this outbreak, so we must wait and see. And in Spain, we have the reports of increasing numbers of cases in Spain, we are watching this closely. For the moment, however, they appear to be following the same pattern, largely being imported cases from Mexico, and before we would consider moving to Phase 6, we would really have to see a sustained community-level transmission within the country, outside of the Americas.

Michelle, ABC: The CDC has said that the origin of the H1N1 outbreaks was in Mexico. Is that still the thinking? Are you still looking, where are you looking, and what are your best working theories?

Gregory Hartl: We have heard that, but actually that is not really a priority for us for the moment. For us the priority is what is happening at this moment and what we can try to do to stop the virus from spreading further. So we are looking forward and I think it is an interesting question and hopefully someone will be able to look at it in more detail later, but for the moment what we need to understand is the current behaviour of the virus. How had it spread? To which age groups? To which groups in the community? And is it predominantly severe or mild? Over how many generations does it spread? Questions like that, that is going to help us the most to respond to and to control this event.

John Acostas: I was wondering, if you could elaborate on the swine fever that has been detected. If there is a risk where you have farms where pigs coexist in a farm yard with chickens, especially in Asia, is there a risk if there is an avian H5N1 outbreak with swine, of the two mixing into a cocktail?

Dr Ben Embarek: Yes that is of course the concern, if it happens, but we have no way of knowing if and when this could happen. But again it is one of the reasons why it is important to monitor the situation in animals actively and to ensure that the disease, if present in animals, does not spread geographically, and precisely to other places where it could pick up more strength from other viruses.

John Cohen, Science Magazine: When was WHO notified about the Canadian herd, and given the reports of more than 200 of the pigs infected and of possible transmission back to another farm worker, does this tell us anything in terms of a natural experiment about containment of this virus?

Dr Ben Embarek: Yes, apparently about 220 animals showed symptoms out of the herd of 2200, so approximately 10% of the herd got infected. This tells us that also for the animal population, it doesn't seem to be a very serious disease and it is apparently from what we know something that is not surprising, and could be expected from a virus like this. We have no information about other people who might have been infected following that event, so we will have to wait and see what comes out of the current investigation. We know that the farm has been put under quarantine, and no infected animals have left the premises, and these are the measures that should be taken in such an event.

Brad Clapper, AP: When there have been questions about food safety, you have said on different occasions that as long as the ham is cooked in the normal way we cook it, it's okay. What about for ham that is not cooked, knowing that people eat ham in different ways, including raw. Do they now have to fry up prosciutto, jambon cru, all other forms of pork in order to be safe? This has never been mentioned in anyway by you guys?

Dr Ben Embarek: No, there is no reason to start destroying these wonderful traditional cured products. You should not forget that to produce a ham it takes a long time where the product is maturing, and this process is also believed to inactivate any virus that might have been on the raw material in the first place. We know that influenza viruses would not survive very long on surfaces or on meat products, for example, so the duration that these products undergo during processing would, even if it the process itself did not inactivate the virus, just the time would be enough to inactivate viruses. So you can continue to safely eat your prosciutto.

Denise Grady, The New York Times: I would like to repeat one that John Cohen asked that did not get answered, and that was when did WHO find out about this herd in Alberta.

And then I would also like to ask if it is necessary, based on this, to have more surveillance of animals, and what exactly does that mean? There are an awful lot of hog farms everywhere.

Dr Ben Embarek: We learned about this last night Geneva time, and I believe that it was the time when it was announced in Canada. As I said, the farm has been put under quarantine, there is no indication that other farms in the vicinity or elsewhere in Canada should be affected. We also understand that the Canadian inspection services and also their counterparts in the US and in Mexico are of course increasing their surveillance activities, and so far no other pig populations have been detected or reported to be affected. But of course, since this has happened once, it could also happen again elsewhere, and therefore it is also important to reiterate to those humans affected, that apart from taking care of not infecting other humans, they should also stay away from pig farms and in particular from close activities involving pigs.

Izumi Oki, NHK, Japanese Television: Two questions: are you saying that as WHO you recommend countries to step up surveillance on swine population? Second question: for people who would be exposed to infected animals, slaughtering pigs or so, what should they do, what do you recommend?

Dr Ben Embarek: To the first question: WHO does not normally recommend animal health authorities to take actions, but we understand from what FAO and OIE have been saying to the animal health authorities is that they are increasing their surveillance of the animal populations, in particular in the countries affected. This is something that is necessary for a better understanding to what extent animals are infected, and if they are, to both protect humans and prevent further spread among the pig population. As for those persons who are involved in close contact with live animals on pig farms, in particular farm workers, slaughter house workers, and all those involved in these activities, they should of course – in the case there is an outbreak of the disease in the farm among the swine population – they have of course to protect themselves, avoid unnecessary contact with the animals, avoid contact with body fluids from these animals that are typically the way you would get the disease transmitted, and in some cases, but we don't know yet, in some cases they might need to wear particular protective equipment. But at least, it is also important to re-emphasize that these farms should be quarantined immediately, the herd should not be allowed to move around, in particular not to spread the disease further among other farms and other pig populations. Therefore it is very important that we understand exactly how the disease appears and spreads in an animal, so we can better advise farmers and veterinary authorities on what they should be looking for, and also so they are capable of identifying the disease and take measures immediately as soon as the disease appears in an animal population.