Needs Assessment and Response for Flu Outbreaks in Poultry

One of the greatest public health threats the world faces is pandemic influenza. Ongoing outbreaks of avian influenza A (H5N1) virus infections in birds and sporadic cases in humans have raised concern about the potential for this virus to evolve into a human influenza pandemic. In response, CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD) has provided H5N1 outbreak support in several countries in Africa and Asia.

In May 2007, NCIRD was asked to assist in the public health response to the first known outbreak of H5N1 in poultry in Ghana. The first outbreak occurred on the outskirts of Tema. Approximately 14,300 birds were culled in response to the outbreak and infected farms were disinfected. A second outbreak was reported in the Sunyani, Brong-Ahafo region.

CDC staff joined a team of physicians, epidemiologists and veterinarians from USAID and the Ghana Health Service on a mission to conduct a needs assessment and assist with outbreak response. During their mission, CDC scientists visited local hospitals, poultry farms, veterinary facilities, laboratories, and regional health offices. They evaluated the area's outbreak response as well as its preparedness for potential human infections. Many hospitals had received adequate supplies in preparation for possible human infections with H5N1. They had also identified where they would isolate potential cases, and determined referral hospitals.

The response team provided technical assistance and training for local veterinary staff, public health officials, and healthcare providers, and assisted in establishing active surveillance for human cases of avian influenza in the outbreak area. The team also used its observations to provide recommendations for strengthening Ghana's outbreak preparedness.

Since the initial visit, CDC -- in collaboration with the Naval Medical Research Unit 3 (NAMRU-3) -- has assisted Ghana Health Services and Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research in the development of a sentinel site surveillance system for influenza in Ghana. The sentinel surveillance system will use data from several Ghanaian hospitals to provide information about the country's influenza activity. This surveillance system will support mechanisms for specimen transport and processing, disease detection, and awareness of medical community response triggers. All of these elements are critical to the early detection of influenza A (H5N1) in humans.

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