



SUCCESS STORY

Helping Asia Fight Avian Influenza

USAID prevents and contains the spread of the deadly H5N1 virus



Photo: World Health Organization

This 7-year-old girl recovered from bird flu thanks to rapid response efforts.

“Outbreaks continue to occur throughout the region, heightening the risk that the H5N1 virus might mutate into a form that could be transmitted among humans.”

— Dr. John MacArthur, USAID

Twelve years ago, no one knew the deadly H5N1 bird flu virus could infect human beings. Then in 1997, there was an outbreak in Hong Kong that killed six people. Scientists feared the virus, having jumped from birds to humans, might mutate and cause a pandemic. Concerns were heightened in 2003 when the H5N1 virus resurfaced in China. Since then, avian influenza (AI) has spread beyond Asia, killing millions of birds and more than 250 of the 400 people it has infected. Eighty percent of those deaths have occurred in Asia, illustrating the need for a regional campaign to fight the disease.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has responded by coordinating efforts with a variety of U.S. and international agencies as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). USAID-sponsored programs help countries prepare for and react to AI outbreaks as well as coordinate with their neighbors to contain the virus's spread.

This is a huge change since 2003 when few people in Southeast Asia were trained in combined human and animal disease surveillance or in rapid response. These are crucial skills to contain AI outbreaks and provide medical treatment to humans, shown to be most effective when given within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms.

Since 2005, USAID has trained more than 7,000 animal health staff and volunteers to detect H5N1 in Asia. As a result, countries now have staff capable of leading responses to contain AI outbreaks.

These training programs have saved lives. In 2007, an outbreak of the H5N1 virus was detected among poultry in Burma. Rapid-response teams, trained with USAID funding, examined 689 people who had been in contact with dead or diseased birds. They found a 7-year-old girl suffering from fever and headache and began antiviral treatment within the crucial 48-hour period. The girl, who later tested positive for the H5N1 virus, survived.

USAID-sponsored AI programs have helped the governments of China, Burma, Laos, and Vietnam develop the knowledge and skills to fight H5N1 through preparedness, surveillance and speedy response. USAID has also established the first rapid-response distribution center to ship emergency supplies to AI outbreaks anywhere in Asia in 24 hours. These new capabilities are protecting the region, and quite possibly the world, from emerging diseases that threaten global health.

