

## Opinion: Chicken Little was right

By Lois Levin/ Special To The Tab  
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Your childhood fears were not irrational. It's a dangerous world. Marvelous medical and technological innovations bring us many comforts, information at lightning speed, and can rescue us from the jaws of death, but we are nonetheless becoming more vulnerable to environmental collapse and to pandemics.

These two looming threats are interrelated. The planet can support billions of people, but some of them, and enormous quantities of goods and natural resources, travel rapidly around the globe every day. Toxic substances are dispersed unrelentingly into the air, water, soil; the planet warms, disrupting all of Earth's ecosystems.

There have been many pandemics in human history. Viruses mutate and cross into human populations from contact with wild animals, moving as rapidly as people and goods around the planet, as hitchhikers. They include: Avian Flu, West Nile Virus, SARS, Ebola and HIV/AIDS. We have no natural immunity to these viruses, which spread wherever people congregate.

Avian flu, in particular, threatens the entire planet as fast as our efficient transportation systems are moving passengers. We have the knowledge today to develop vaccines and to implement immunization programs against these diseases, but not rapidly enough to prevent large numbers of deaths and great human suffering. Viruses spread like wildfire after escaping from a wild population and mutating.

We cannot keep pace of Emerging Infectious Disease (EIDs). It took nearly two years for SARS viruses to get to the first human trials, and it will take another two years before safe general distribution is possible. And immunizing all at-risk individuals is impossible.

The underlying problems are: (1) Deforestation – humans are unrelentingly invading and destroying wildlife habitat, and (2) inadequate control of wildlife commerce. Even a crash program to produce enough vaccine for everyone within our borders would not solve those dilemmas. And we cannot, like Osama bin Laden, all move to caves in remote mountains.

EID is a global issue. The major burden of its costs to the environment and to human health are borne by the public. Most national governments have limited resources, but the rich nations and big corporations can afford to underwrite immunization programs in countries where cases of bird flu are now occurring. Such programs, albeit reactive measures, could immunize all the farmers who handle poultry as well as their families, and could closely monitor the local people who are at greatest risk. This is an approach that requires a shift in thinking beyond the current focus on domestic interventions. But immunization programs are not enough.

We have much work to do to convince our own government and multinational corporations to take proactive actions to address this looming crisis. That means looking at the big picture. It means implementing tried and true conservation measures to stop deforestation and to control illegal wildlife trade – the reasons that these diseases are emerging in the first place.

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