

# Pandemics

In Aesop's fable, *The Shepherd Boy and the Wolf*, the boy's ill fate might have been avoided had he been more circumspect, crying "possible wolf" instead.

Last week, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that the spread of a new strain of swine flu implied that a global pandemic was "very imminent". This prompted public health officials around the world to clarify that the word pandemic would be used even if the new virus turned out to cause only "mild symptoms". WHO is now debating whether to add a second measure that indicates how dangerous a virus is, rather than merely how quickly it spreads. Switching metaphors, it is a bit like shouting "possible fire" in a crowded cinema.

To be sure, this is a bid to contain, if not the virus itself, then mass fear and confusion. It is clear that the main culprits are the world's media, which have run the story of H1N1 in hyper drive, with sensationalist headlines aimed at doling out visceral dread. Not only do we now live in the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression, but also in the gloom of potentially the greatest pandemic since the Spanish Flu of 1918.

Thucydides is credited with recording the first pandemic in history when 30,000 citizens of Athens died in 430 BC during the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta. As the Christiane Amanpour of his day, he diligently recorded how the disease spread, killing many in its wake, and how some people had such a thirst they threw themselves into wells.

But it is the Spanish Flu of 1918 – also known as La Grippe – that provides a more precise and far more apocalyptic sense of a global disaster in the making. An estimated 20 million to 100 million died in the course of two years, decimating entire communities and causing more devastation than World War I – during which, by contrast, a total of 9 million people died.

So while the media has certainly cried wolf 1,000 times too often in recent years, there is reason for genuine worry. Because swine flu is a new virus, most people will have little to no immunity to it, and it is spreading rapidly across the world. Moreover, this ability to jump easily to humans and to transmit from person to person could result in H1N1 mutating into something far worse. Best-case estimates of a more virulent strain talk of more than one billion people worldwide requiring medical care, 20 million to 30 million being hospitalized and 2 million to 7 million deaths; and worst-case scenario at this stage is little more than gratuitous fear-mongering.

Beyond the terrible cost in human life, the economy would take a severe hit, hurting the livelihood of billions of people and coming at a time when the world's financial system is still lying in knockout on the mat.

The most immediate economic impacts of a pandemic might arise not from actual death or sickness, but from the uncoordinated efforts of individuals trying to avoid becoming infected. This at least was the experience during SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), which spread from southern China. People tried to avoid infection by minimising face-to-face interactions, resulting in severe blows to such sectors as tourism, retail, mass transport, hotels and restaurants,

as well as a supply shocks stemming from absenteeism, disruption of production processes and shifts to more costly procedures.

In the case of SARS, for instance, the regional GDP of East Asian economies dropped by 2 per cent during the outbreak, despite the comparatively low infection rates – 8,096 known cases in all and 774 deaths. Putting rough figures to the global scenario in the event of a swine flu pandemic, 2 per cent of global GDP would amount to some \$800 billion. But this is a conservative figure; it is fair to assume that the drop would be even higher given that a global and more virulent flu epidemic would have far more repercussions than SARS.

But thankfully, there is a flip side to the element of risk: not all prophecies of doom materialise. With hindsight, reporting on the risk of a dangerous swine flu pandemic could ultimately prove as unnecessary as earlier grave assessments of pandemic outbreaks of SARS or bird flu. In a modern retelling of Aesop's fable, the moral becomes less about lying (and perishing when one eventually tells the truth) and more about constant vigilance: regularly checking disease updates – like keeping an eye on the weather forecasts – in order to get a sense of what could happen rather than what will happen. More importantly, it requires a balancing act of trying to stay informed about the dangers without getting carried away by fear.

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