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NHS fails to cope with bodies in flu pandemic test

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A three-day training exercise showed the NHS was not ready for a severe flu attack

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The NHS failed tests of its ability to cope with a major flu outbreak, the chief medical officer has revealed. A three-day training exercise showed it was not ready for a severe flu attack and that “a lot of things need improving”, Professor Dame Sally Davies said.

She warned that the world was intensely vulnerable and society would struggle to deal with the huge number of people killed by a serious pandemic.

Operation Cygnus involved testing co-ordination between hospitals, Whitehall and disease-tracking experts in a scenario where tens of thousands of people were struck down by a virulent new strain of flu.

New types of disease frequently jump from animals to humans and experts fear that it is only a matter of time before a deadly and contagious strain emerges. A new strain of bird flu is infecting poultry and ducks but has not yet spread to humans.

Dame Sally rated global readiness for a major outbreak at just three out of ten as she said that the NHS would struggle to identify diseases before they began to spread. She said that a new infection was emerging every eight months.

She told the World Innovation Summit for Health: “We’ve just had in the UK a three-day exercise on flu on a pandemic that killed a lot of people. It became clear that we could not cope with the excess bodies, for instance. It becomes very worrying about the deaths, and what that will do to society as you start to get all those deaths, [including] the economic impact.

“If we, as one of the most prepared countries, are going through an exercise and find a lot of things that need improving just on the internal bit, add to it the [lack of] vaccines and then the global traffic and the lack of solidarity . . . a severe one will stretch everyone.”

A swine flu pandemic in 2009, which was considered very mild, killed hundreds of people in Britain. Experts fear that a more severe strain would lead to tens of thousands of deaths in this country.

Citing last year's outbreak of middle east respiratory syndrome in South Korea, Dame Sally told international health leaders: "If you don't know you've got a new disease then you don't isolate people. There was overcrowding in the emergency room, inadequate ventilation, family and friends going through. That could happen in any of our countries."

Seth Berkley, head of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation, said it was "crazy" that so many vaccines were still produced using eggs, a slow process which makes it hard to ramp up production during epidemics.

"If you have a major, major pandemic and you all of a sudden have reductions in flights, reductions in police services and all of those things, how do you manage in that situation?" he said.

A spokesman for the Department of Health said: "The World Health Organisation recognises that the UK is one of the most prepared countries in the world for pandemic flu. We regularly test ourselves to make sure this remains the case. Any issues are thoroughly explored with the relevant agencies so that lessons are learnt."

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