



Britain has sufficient stockpiles of antiviral drugs to protect 50% of its population.

by the non-profit group Trust for America's Health, based in Washington DC, also noted that budget cuts at health departments at all levels slowed the US response, for instance by delaying testing.

"We have to consider what happened in the month of May as maybe a warning of what's coming, and we're working very hard this summer to have countermeasures available if the need for those arises" in the autumn, says Robin Robinson, principal deputy director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority within the US Health and Human Services department.

By contrast, Asia had expected an avian pandemic virus to arise in its backyard and was not fully prepared for swine flu from overseas. Most of the flu plans for the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations "focus on how to cull chickens", says Hitoshi Oshitani, a virologist with the Tohoku University Graduate School of Medicine in Sendai, Japan. "They may have some

rapid containment plan, but containment is not possible for this current virus," he says.

Some Asian countries have applied containment measures that had little chance of working. China, for example, quarantined foreign travellers with fever symptoms and symptomless travellers in contact with those, a move not backed by scientific evidence, Toner says.

When the virus spread to Europe, some nations found they were not as ready as their thorough plans had led them to believe they were. For instance, Britain's Health Protection Agency, which was responsible for investigating the initial swine flu cases, did not at first have enough staff available to carry out the investigations, says Sandra Mounier-Jack, a health-policy analyst at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. And a planned telephone line that was to have been used to help distribute antivirals had not been set up when swine flu appeared.

These are common problems, says Mounier-Jack. "The major gaps are about making the plans operational — making sure that people at local levels know their roles and responsibilities, even in countries which have very good plans and are rich."

And some long-standing challenges for Europe have still not been addressed, such as the piecemeal nature of the response. "We have 27 pandemic preparedness plans in different states of maturity, and now individual ministries of health are all lining up to buy up vaccines," says Albert Osterhaus of the University of Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

But perhaps the biggest global challenge is arriving now, as the Southern Hemisphere enters its flu season and swine flu threatens many of the least-ready countries. "In general, the developing countries are not prepared," Oshitani says. The World Bank has released billions of dollars for preparedness in these regions, but many developing nations still do not have plans for dealing with a pandemic — and some that do have simply cut and pasted versions of plans from developed countries, which do not apply to poorer nations unable to afford vaccines and antivirals.

People in poor nations already suffer from a higher incidence of conditions, such as malnutrition and HIV, that make them more vulnerable to the new virus. In addition, they are likely to be left out of the global scramble for a vaccine, which has already started as nations such as the United States and Britain rush to tie up vaccine contracts.

On the whole, Oshitani says, "this pandemic came too early. If we had had two more years, we would have been better prepared."

Erika Check Hayden



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UK science shuffled again

British prime minister Gordon Brown has scrapped the government department in charge of science and higher education, just two years after it was created.

As part of a cabinet reshuffle on 5 June, responsibilities for research and universities were absorbed into a newly inflated business department that will "build Britain's capabilities to compete in the global economy", says a government statement.

Science-policy experts say that the merger, which brings the United Kingdom's science budget under the ultimate control of business secretary Peter Mandelson, might increase the focus on science as the country tries to haul itself out of economic recession. But scientists might increasingly have to justify the economic benefits of their research.

The new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills sees the end of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), a short-lived attempt to bring greater coherence to policies surrounding science and higher education.

Higher education will now be part of a more powerful department, but some worry whether it could become "the handmaiden of business", says Bahram Bekhradnia of the Higher Education Policy Institute in Oxford.

Phil Willis, the Liberal Democrat chairman of the House of Commons committee that oversaw DIUS, criticized the move. "The real casualty of this ill-thought-out reorganization is the nation's strategic science base," he says. "Science needs a stable home at the heart of government policy."

But Martin Rees, president of the Royal Society, praised the decision. "Science and innovation should be the bedrock on which the economy builds as we come out of the current recession," he says. "Placing science alongside business and enterprise should help to make that happen."

Higher-education minister David Lammy is moving to the new department, as is science minister Paul Drayson, who takes on extra responsibilities as defence procurement minister. The former head of DIUS, John Denham, will head the communities and local government department.

The arrangement is likely to be temporary, as the unpopular Labour government must call an election by June 2010.

Richard Van Noorden

K. COLLINS/REUTERS

CDC

H1N1 update

As confirmed by the World Health Organization, as of 8 June:
Cases: 25,288, in 73 countries
Deaths: 139, in 6 countries

AUSTRALIA: Quarantines all players with the Queensland Origin rugby team after a player tests positive for swine flu.

For Nature's swine flu coverage, see www.nature.com/swineflu.