



Hospitals may help spread flu pandemic, group says

By Maggie Fox, Health and Science Correspondent

WASHINGTON, Dec 8 (Reuters) - U.S. hospitals could contribute to the spread of influenza during a pandemic because most do not follow good hygiene practices, a group reported on Thursday.

Their report, combined with a Congressional Budget Office report showing a pandemic could cost the U.S. economy \$675 billion, adds to an increasingly dire picture being painted of what a bird flu pandemic would look like in the United States.

U.S. officials continued to urge states and businesses to get ready for an outbreak of serious disease, issuing a checklist of preparations, while Congress wrestled with funding a federal plan before the end of the year.

The H5N1 avian influenza spreading through poultry in Asia and parts of Europe, including Ukraine, is considered the worst threat now. It has killed 69 people and infected 135, but a few mutations could turn it into a virus that spreads easily and quickly among people.

Many reports have shown that hospitals can be a source for spreading such diseases, because health care workers fail to follow even basic hygiene practices such as washing their hands after touching any patient or piece of equipment.

A report from the National Center for Policy Analysis predicted that unless hospitals tighten procedures quickly, they could contribute to the spread of H5N1.

"Shoddy infection control is poor preparation for flu and poor homeland security as well," said Betsy McCaughey, a former lieutenant governor of New York who heads the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths, a group that campaigns about hospital infections and which helped write the report.

A separate report, from the U.S. Congressional Budget Office, shows that a bird flu pandemic would cost the U.S. economy \$675 billion if 30 percent of the population were infected -- as has been the case in the past three pandemics.

2.5 PERCENT DEATH RATE FORESEEN

U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a Tennessee Republican, said the report assumed a 2.5 percent mortality rate, that the pandemic would last for three months and that 30 percent of the workforce would become ill and miss three weeks of work.

It predicted people would stay home and reduce turnout at restaurants, shopping malls, sporting events, churches and schools, with demand falling by 80 percent for entertainment, arts, recreation, restaurants, and lodging.

"Retail trade would fall by 25 percent," Frist said in a speech at the National Press Club in Washington. "Together, the supply and demand impacts would result in a 5 percent reduction in GDP (gross domestic product)," Frist said.

The report supports other predictions that have been made about the potential effect on the U.S. economy. The World Bank has predicted a pandemic could cost the global economy \$800 billion a year.

U.S. President George W. Bush released a \$7.1 billion bird flu plan in November but Congress has yet to fund it. Frist said he hopes for legislation before the recess later this month, but many conservatives are afraid the deficit is already too big and want to make cuts to pay for the spending.

One part of the plan involves building stockpiles of influenza drugs, which would not provide a cure but which might help make the most vulnerable patients less ill. Roche AG <ROG.VX> said it was moving ahead with plans to license various aspects of producing its drug, Tamiflu, to some generic manufacturers. New York Sen. Charles Schumer, a Democrat who has been pressing the company on this issue, said the company had reached agreements with two generic makers but the company said it had no details to release about this yet. (Additional reporting by Susan Heavey in Washington)