

## **Another "Y2K"?**

### **Did we pass on the pandemic?**

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Back in 1948 a toothpaste commercial went "You'll wonder where the yellow went when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent."

Today, we have to wonder not where the yellow went but where the pandemic (scare) went.



## **Other "current" concerns**

Probably, given the worldwide financial crisis and a new U.S. administration, it's just as well that the pandemic panic is out of sight and out of mind.

But The Flu, Avian Influenza H5N1, fell off the front pages a few months ago. About the only place avian influenza still rates mention is on a list such as ProMed. ProMed, <http://www.promedmail.org/>, tracks all manner of medical risks to man and beast wherever they occur in the world and bills itself as *"The global electronic reporting system for outbreaks of emerging infectious diseases & toxins, open to all sources. ProMED-mail, the Program for Monitoring Emerging Diseases, is a program of the International Society for Infectious Diseases."*

I am a member of a Crisis Management team for a very large organization.

We recently had a meeting and, while munching on goodies before the start of the session - if you feed them, they will come, something every enterprise risk management practitioner needs to remember - I casually asked "What happened with the Pandemic Push that had us all rushing around gathering information like madmen in search of sanity?"

Well, I was told, we got a new CFO and New CFO decided the threat of a pandemic wasn't worth the money.

Yet, the H5N1 threat lingers. Combine migratory fowl, people who literally live with poultry, and the speed of flight, and the threat remains very real.

## **Two components in risk equation**

But, as enterprise risk management practitioners, we know that are two components to the risk equations - probability and impact.

The reason the H5N1 threat made headlines for so long was not so much the probability - at least in my mind - but the impact.

Impact on my organization.

Impact on the economy. (Can anyone imagine if H5N1 and the financial fiasco hit at the same time?)

A long time ago I wrote that there were greater pandemic threats than H5N1.

I believed it then and I continue to believe it.

Small pox has come back like the Phoenix rising from the ashes.

Tuberculosis, including a particularly resistant strain, is a very real danger.

As this is keyed, the "regular" flu season is at hand.

Signs are going up throughout the corporate world urging personnel to get - often free - "regular flu" inoculations.

I'm not denigrating the H5N1 threat.

It, like Y2K, got people thinking about "continuity" in one form or another - from "who can keep the computers working" to true enterprise risk management.

### ***Another "non-event?"***

The problem, for practitioners, is that like Y2K, the Pandemic Panic was a non-event.

Y2K could have been an event if we had done nothing. But we scurried around and checked everything that had a microprocessor - from main frame computers to coffee pot timers.

The pandemic threat had us developing contact lists - and duplicating efforts all over the place - and at least thinking about what we would do if it arrived.

Who would assure the computers were working, and - occasionally - oh yes, who will be available to use the data entered into and pulled from computer programs and applications.

But, the pandemic threat also is similar to hurricane season.

As a storm bears down on us, we rush around at the last minute filling up jugs with water, boarding up windows, and checking batteries.

If the storm bypasses us, or even if it brushes us and we escape the full brunt of an Andrew or Katrina, we are asked "Why did you try to scare us; nothing happened."

The next time a storm heads our way, we think back to the one whose damage we escaped.

Interestingly, the pandemic scenario has another similarity to a hurricane: you can see it coming; it doesn't just "happen" like a HazMat spill or earthquake with little or no warning.

If the pundits were - are - correct, a pandemic event will cross the longitudes in a wavelike manner - first New York, then Chicago, then Denver, and finally San Francisco. Actually, it's more likely to travel in the other direction since there seems a greater probability that H5N1 might morph into a human-to-human transmissible disease there than, say, Jerusalem or Amsterdam.

As an enterprise risk management practitioner, I am less disturbed about the fact that the pandemic has fallen off the map than the fact that all the effort that went into the Pandemic Panic will either sit on the shelf gathering dust or be confined to File 13.

Understand, I AM disturbed that the pandemic effort apparently was unappreciated and that the "lessons learned" at management level were lessons quickly forgotten.

In truth I won't fault the new CFO for cancelling a continuation of a major pandemic effort. In the overall scheme of things - *as they stand today* - the probability of an H5N1 Avian Influenza mutating into a human-transmittable disease is minimal; very low and, although its impact would be great, it just isn't worth throwing money at the threat.

## ***Wasted effort?***

I do fault the CFO if all the effort that went into "Pandemic Prep" go to waste.

Because of the headlines, extensive contact lists were developed.

Because of the headlines, the organization dimly recognized the need for primary and alternate personnel in all critical positions; indeed, it re-examined what constituted "critical positions."

Because of the headlines, we suddenly became focused on what functions could be assumed by other divisions within the organization, and remote access gained more attention.

But the headlines went away and with that, so did stratospheric sponsorship of anything "business continuity."

Hurricanes, even the likes of Rita, and Andrew before that, because they are more localized than a pandemic would be, are written off - not as "lessons learned" to avoid or mitigate the inevitable future event but as "we survived the worst so we don't need no stinkin' plan."

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