



Birds, viruses, and history: The current ‘genuine adventure’

The great microbiologist Hans Zinsser observed in 1934 that, “Infectious disease is one of the few genuine adventures left in the world.”¹ During the past quarter century, this statement has taken on new meaning with the advent of AIDS, Hantavirus infections, West Nile encephalitis, and most recently, avian influenza. In all of these, at least initially, a virus is transmitted from animals to humans. When I went to medical school in the 1960s, where we incidentally used Zinsser’s textbook of microbiology, we were taught that viruses were species-specific and couldn’t jump from an animal to humans. It looks like you can forget that rule.

On page 273 in this issue of the *Journal*, infectious disease specialist Steve Gordon discusses avian influenza, puts it into perspective with more mundane human influenza A, with which we are all unfortunately familiar, and proposes a preventive strategy involving mandatory immunization of health care workers (that’s us, folks). The goal here is to prevent our becoming a reservoir of infection and thus posing an unacceptable risk to our patients. However much we might not like that approach, immunization certainly beats what is happening to the poor chickens, ie, “culling,” a nice term for killing the suspected carriers.

So as chicken flu becomes the current “genuine adventure” in the chronicles of public health, following close on the heels of SARS and West Nile encephalitis, we can reflect on the aptness of Zinsser’s further observation that “...however secure and well-regulated civilized life may become, bacteria, protozoa, viruses, infected fleas, lice, ticks, mosquitoes, and bedbugs will always lurk in the shadows ready to pounce when neglect, poverty, famine, or war lets down the defenses.” He might well have added the passage of time to his list of circumstances leading to the next adventure.

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■ REFERENCES

1. Zinsser H. Rats, Lice, and History. Boston: Little, Brown; 1963:13.