



Harvey V. Fineberg is president of the Institute of Medicine.



Mary Elizabeth Wilson is associate professor of Global Health and Population at the Harvard School of Public Health and associate clinical professor at Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA.

Epidemic Science in Real Time

FEW SITUATIONS MORE DRAMATICALLY ILLUSTRATE THE SALIENCE OF SCIENCE TO POLICY THAN AN epidemic. The relevant science takes place rapidly and continually, in the laboratory, clinic, and community. In facing the current swine flu (H1N1 influenza) outbreak, the world has benefited from research investment over many years, as well as from preparedness exercises and planning in many countries. The global public health enterprise has been tempered by the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002–2003, the ongoing threat of highly pathogenic avian flu, and concerns over bioterrorism. Researchers and other experts are now able to make vital contributions in real time. By conducting the right science and communicating expert judgment, scientists can enable policies to be adjusted appropriately as an epidemic scenario unfolds.

In the past, scientists and policy-makers have often failed to take advantage of the opportunity to learn and adjust policy in real time. In 1976, for example, in response to a swine flu outbreak at Fort Dix, New Jersey, a decision was made to mount a nationwide immunization program against this virus because it was deemed similar to that responsible for the 1918–1919 flu pandemic. Immunizations were initiated months later despite the fact that not a single related case of infection had appeared by that time elsewhere in the United States or the world (www.iom.edu/swinefluaffair). Decision-makers failed to take seriously a key question: What additional information could lead to a different course of action? The answer is precisely what should drive a research agenda in real time today.

In the face of a threatened pandemic, policy-makers will want real-time answers in at least five areas where science can help: pandemic risk, vulnerable populations, available interventions, implementation possibilities and pitfalls, and public understanding. Pandemic risk, for example, entails both spread and severity. In the current H1N1 influenza outbreak, the causative virus and its genetic sequence were identified in a matter of days. Within a couple of weeks, an international consortium of investigators developed preliminary assessments of cases and mortality based on epidemic modeling.*

Specific genetic markers on flu viruses have been associated with more severe outbreaks. But virulence is an incompletely understood function of host-pathogen interaction, and the absence of a known marker in the current H1N1 virus does not mean it will remain relatively benign. It may mutate or acquire new genetic material. Thus, ongoing, refined estimates of its pandemic potential will benefit from tracking epidemiological patterns in the field and viral mutations in the laboratory. If epidemic models suggest that more precise estimates on specific elements such as attack rate, case fatality rate, or duration of viral shedding will be pivotal for projecting pandemic potential, then these measurements deserve special attention. Even when more is learned, a degree of uncertainty will persist, and scientists have the responsibility to accurately convey the extent of and change in scientific uncertainty as new information emerges.

A range of laboratory, epidemiologic, and social science research will similarly be required to provide answers about vulnerable populations; interventions to prevent, treat, and mitigate disease and other consequences of a pandemic; and ways of achieving public understanding that avoid both over- and underreaction. Also, we know from past experience that planning for the implementation of such projects has often been inadequate. For example, if the United States decides to immunize twice the number of people in half the usual time, are the existing channels of vaccine distribution and administration up to the task? On a global scale, making the rapid availability and administration of vaccine possible is an order of magnitude more daunting.

Scientists and other flu experts in the United States and around the world have much to occupy their attention. Time and resources are limited, however, and leaders in government agencies will need to ensure that the most consequential scientific questions are answered. In the meantime, scientists can discourage irrational policies, such as the banning of pork imports, and in the face of a threatened pandemic, energetically pursue science in real time.

– Harvey V. Fineberg and Mary Elizabeth Wilson

10.1126/science.1176297

*C. Fraser *et al.*, *Science* 11 May 2009 (10.1126/science.1176062).

