

A(H1N1) flu: “A rapid reflection force is needed”

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Interview : Patrick Lagadec, by Paul Benkimoun, *Le Monde*

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The A(H1N1) flu keeps on spreading around the world. In an update published on Friday, June 5, the WHO listed 21,940 confirmed cases, 125 of which resulting in the patient's death, across 69 countries. Phase 6, which is triggered when two regions of the world are affected by independent processes of virus transmission, is said to be “imminent”. Indeed, doctor Keiji Fukuda, Deputy Director of WHO, has acknowledged that the world was “on the cusp” of the first flu pandemic of the century. This would be a watershed event, according to Patrick Lagadec, Director of research at Ecole Polytechnique, and a specialist of crisis- and risk management. In our interview, he underlines the need to go beyond setting technical requirements, and rather “prepare for the unanticipated”.

It now seems inevitable that the WHO will move to Phase 6 on A(H1N1). What is your reaction?

This move will confirm the dynamics that have prevailed since the start of the crisis. I am not privy to the decision process, but it seems to me that reaction to the virus' spread should very quickly have become a worldwide full scale exercise – even before it was formally described as a pandemic. However, the collapse of international finance took precedence, and we waited for Phase 6 before acting in earnest...

What are the characteristics of this health crisis?

I see four crises into one here.

First, it potentially is a major catastrophe, which requires considerable logistical assets and an effective chain of command.

At the same time, it also is a “high visibility” crisis, similar in this respect to a number of events in the 1990s; we see operational headquarters being set up, *ad hoc* communication efforts, and of course, calls for transparency, and pedagogical outreach vis-à-vis the greater public.

It is also a “systemic crisis” which demands strong political leadership.

Lastly, we cannot ignore the risk of societal breakdowns: a risk that can only be contained with leaders who can reshape our strategies and analyses from the ground up.

For decision-makers, one of the challenges posed by the A(H1N1) flu epidemics is to determine the most suitable approaches. Should we be exceedingly careful, even at the risk of going too far, by taking stringent measures (banning public meetings, canceling sporting events, etc.); or reject these options based on their economic and social impact?

The only way to get this right is to think on our feet. A specialist has explained that in a flu pandemic, freezing all transport on U.S. soil would only delay the spread of the disease by 8 days, if the decision was made once 50+ cases had already occurred.

How should a pandemic response plan be put together?

The first page of that plan should be blank.

Granted, it should lay out technical tools that can help face the pandemic etc.; but when alarms are first triggered, the most important thing is to take a step back and *think* first. Of course, governments typically find this approach unacceptable, as they fear suggesting that they are at a loss. Leaders tend to think that an expert's job is not to raise questions, but to answer them. Our models are meant to address relatively stable systems. But when faced with such chaotic challenges as a flu pandemic, they simply break asunder.

What will happen if, by October, we see H1N1 reemerge, combined with a worsening of the economic crisis? Our pandemic plans should not be so many new "Maginot Lines", i.e. defensive lines set up in the wrong spot.

Crisis communication leads to the dumbing-down of approaches, such as: "having a bad plan is better than having no plan at all". More often than not, it aims to provide leaders with ready-made strategies.

Now, I do not claim that existing strategies for pandemic response are useless: but they should not obscure the need for a dynamic process of strategic reflection. This hinges on four key questions: What are we looking at? What pitfalls are out there? Who are the stakeholders that we will have to work with? What game-changing initiatives can be taken so that we can trigger "virtuous circles" in an otherwise chaotic environment? We should set up, internationally, what I call a "Rapid reflection force" – by which I do not mean yet another "assembly", with one representative per country!

What changes do you see in 21st-century crises, compared to those of earlier times?

Most significantly, they require a break in the nature of "leadership". Leaders now are called upon to focus on decision-making processes, rather than on the mere implementation of plans. In *The Age of the Unthinkable*, author Joshua Cooper Ramo writes that "We are entering a revolutionary age. And we are doing so with ideas, leaders, and institutions that are better suited for a world now several centuries behind us."

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