

## The wolf at the door



- 1 Here we go again. Four years ago this week, the world watched terrified as a newly discovered strain of flu spread, with shocking rapidity, from its starting point in Mexico to countries across the globe. The H1N1 swine flu did what SARS and H5N1 bird flu failed to do: it turned into a pandemic, just as health experts had been dreading. Luckily, it turned out to be quite mild. But its relatively low death toll was taken by some as evidence that the public health response had been an overreaction; the scientists had cried wolf, they claimed — perhaps at the request of vaccine manufacturers.
- 2 Now we are faced with a worrying new outburst of flu, this time from China. So far H7N9 avian flu has not been able to pass readily from person to person. That might change at any time — and if it does, there's every reason to fear the worst. That's not just because the new flu seems to be at the lethal end of the scale. It's also because we are barely any better equipped to respond to a pandemic than we were in 2009 — despite considerable scope to enhance our readiness.
- 3 We have made some progress. Better monitoring has allowed us to track this eruption more closely, although we still don't know exactly where it came from. Last year's controversial research on what makes a flu strain dangerous has proved its worth by uncovering the H7N9 threat long before we might otherwise have spotted it.
- 4 As we continue to get better at spotting potentially dangerous viruses, we can expect alarm bells to start ringing more frequently. The danger is that this will breed complacency, rather than vigilance — and that this will be encouraged by short-sighted types who say that the warnings are only meaningful if the worst actually comes to pass.

- 5 We are still a long way from being able to contain flu, and so the risk of a pandemic remains very real. Of course, there is always a place for healthy scepticism. Science, more than any other field of human endeavour, prizes it. But we should not spend so much time debating whether scientists are crying wolf that we forget that wolves really do exist.

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