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Flu Pandemic: a testing time for emergency planning

by Philip Baum

For any readers who had the good fortune to be in the audience at the Airport Council International's World Assembly in Auckland, New Zealand, this November, they will bear witness to the sobering effect of Dr. Bradford A. Kay's presentation on the potential impact of avian flu. The post-911 industry recovery feel good factor, frequently expressed by other speakers, was temporarily put on hold. Whilst passenger levels are now in excess of their pre-2001 levels and SARS is now consigned to the history books, there is an even greater danger lurking around the corner. Should avian flu mutate into a human form, as is expected, the potential death toll around the globe will make the casualty figures from recent natural catastrophes, such as the tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in India and Pakistan, seem almost insignificant.

Unlike the SARS crisis, the potential epidemic is not one we can quarantine against. Furthermore, unlike the terrorist incidents our section of the industry guards against, where even if an attack is "successful" the physical impact is actually only on a minimal number of souls, should the pandemic occur all our lives will be directly touched by it. Using Dr. Kay's current statistics, with the current mortality rate of avian flu being 50% (cholera is 1% and even SARS was only 10%), there is every reason to believe that we all may well know somebody who will fall victim to the disease. The disease does not only kill the young and elderly; the limited number of fatalities that have already occurred have been in people in the prime of their lives. The World Health Organisation estimates that the death toll from the 1918 "Spanish Flu" (believed to be between 20 and 40 million, yet quite possibly

higher still) could well be exceeded.

At first thought, one might well argue that, in the event of a pandemic, aviation security controls should not be our priority. Yet think again. It is precisely at times of natural disasters that evildoers can wreak their greatest havoc. Take for example the human trafficking of children that escalated as the waves of last year's tsunami withdrew, or the looting and violence that we witnessed in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina.

The absence of attacks against civil aviation by al Qaeda cells and members of other terrorist groups is, we hope, due to the

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increased focus and effort on aviation security by states. Those attacks that have taken place have, in terms of civil aviation, been perpetrated where there have been known weaknesses in the system. In Russia, last year's success by Chechen suicide bombers simply indicated what we have long known – we currently do not screen people for explosives. Away from aviation, the Madrid rail and London Underground attacks took advantage of the absence of effective rail security programmes.

We can all point to probable or possible targets for terrorist action. In Sydney, as I write, the Australian authorities may well have prevented an attack on the Sydney

Harbour Bridge or Opera House. We know there has been concern about the New York subway, bridges, tunnels, cruise ships, pipelines and sporting venues. Yet aviation will always remain the high profile target and the potential use of aircraft as missiles will always be hanging over us. With that in mind we need to ensure that we maintain standards. The words of AVSECO's General Manager, Sidney Chau, resonate in my mind – "we need a sense of crisis 24/7".

Granted the very real fears expressed by the World Health Organisation (like ICAO, a UN body), the aviation security industry must also ready itself for the pandemic should it occur. These are not scare tactics – that's not in the nature of the W.H.O. This is real.

Should the pandemic hit, airports will remain critical elements of the national support infrastructure. They will be the hubs for the transportation of medical personnel, the military, pharmaceuticals, and family members of infected persons. As hubs they will, as always, bring together people of different nationalities, transporting them in aircraft that may enhance the speed of infection. It is not unreasonable therefore to assume that significant numbers of airline and airport employees may be infected with the flu virus. Others may simply refuse to come to work. Whilst the numbers of the general travelling public will decline, as tourism and business travel did during the SARS crisis, there will still be a need to safeguard the industry around the clock.

Consequently airport and airline security management should be asking themselves how they will cope. Planning should already be well under way. Granted a reduced staffing compliment, which security channels can be closed? How can shift patterns be altered? Are we, as employers, considering offer-

ing staff the opportunity to be vaccinated? Are there other people we can call upon to assist that are not normally considered part of the avsec unit? Contract security companies should already be discussing with their clients how they can best continue to operate should the fears mutate into reality. Perhaps, in airports where there are a number of security providers operating, they should even be speaking with each other as to how best cross-utilise their personnel. Extreme times call for extreme measure and one would like to think that, faced with a pandemic with such horrific potential, commercial competition would be put on the back burner.

Whilst schools may close, airports cannot. So, in the same way that healthcare managers are planning their response should their own staff to be infected, so should we. We cannot allow a pandemic, about which we have advanced notification, be an excuse for dropping our guard. The terrorist threat may

remain constant; we must not kid ourselves that terror international will simply feel sorry for us. Those on their team are not sportsmen who will kick the ball out of play until we have recovered. Should our vulnerability increase through a dilapidated workforce, many of whom will also be having to cope with their own personal family issues in tandem to performing their professional functions, the actual potential for an attack will increase accordingly.

We all hope that the threat of a pandemic will never become a reality. But it may. Whatever actually happens in the weeks and months ahead, this does give us all the incentive to check our emergency response plans and rehearse the drills. After all, next time it may not be a healthcare scare, but a CBRN attack that would have a similar impact. If there is anything good about the news from the World Health Organisation, it is that it has given us the perfect excuse to be prepared...

“It is precisely at times of natural disasters that evildoers can wreak their greatest havoc”

CARGO PROTECTION BEGINS WITH DETECTION

X-RAY, TRACE, EXPLOSIVES, DRUGS, AND WEAPONS DETECTION



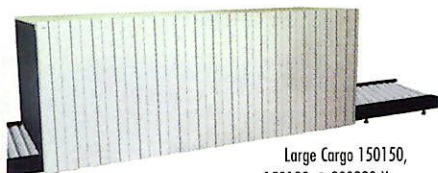
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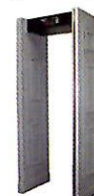
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