

# News In Brief

"The reality is ... pandemics happen. When it comes to a pandemic, we are overdue and we are underprepared."

- Mike Leavitt, US Health and Human Services Secretary

## AVIAN FLU'S WORST-CASE SCENARIO

Federal authorities are contemplating a worst-case scenario in the United States, in which more than 92 million people will become infected in the space of 4 months.

Projections are based on the 1918 bird flu pandemic that killed about 50 million worldwide. According to mathematical projections used by Washington, everything begins with an epidemic that breaks out in a Thai village, where the H5N1 virus has hypothetically mutated and acquired the ability to transmit among humans.

(Source: *The Straits Times*)

## CONVENTIONAL VS ATYPICAL ANTIPSYCHOTIC MEDICATIONS

In a follow-up study to the United States Food & Drug Administration (FDA) advisory on increased mortality among elderly patients on atypical anti-psychotic drugs, a retrospective cohort study was performed. This showed that

conventional anti-psychotic agents are at least as likely to increase the risk of death in the elderly, compared to the atypicals. This has implications for prescription decisions, as well as management of psychosis among elderly patients in the community.

(Source: *NEJM* 2005; 353:2335-2341)

## REDOX REDUX

Acetylcysteine, a redox-reducing agent, is already used in the treatment of paracetamol overdose, as a mucolytic agent in respiratory conditions, and as prophylaxis against contrast-induced nephrotoxicity in radiological imaging. Recent research suggests that it also can be useful in the chronic progressive lung disease known as idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.

In a double-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled multicenter study of patients with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, acetylcysteine was shown to improve preservation of vital capacity and single-breath carbon monoxide

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diffusing capacity (DLCO), when added to prednisolone and azathioprine.

(Source: *NEJM* 2005; 353:2229-2242)

### **TAMIFLU RESISTANCE ALARMS EXPERTS**

A study published in the New England Journal of Medicine reported deaths in 4 out of 8 Vietnamese bird flu patients treated with Tamiflu. Lab tests showed that 2 of them – girls aged 13 and 18 – had developed resistance.

Roche, the Swiss pharmaceutical group which makes Tamiflu, released a statement suggesting that increased doses may be needed. It may also become necessary to combine the drug with other antiviral agents in order to treat H5N1 effectively.

(Source: *The Straits Times*)

### **FACE-OFF BECOMES REALITY**

Professor Jean-Michel Dubernard, a surgeon at Edouard Herriot Hospital in Paris, in collaboration with Dr Bernard Devauchelle, performed the world's first partial face transplant, grafting a nose, lips and chin onto the face of a 38-year-old French woman who was disfigured in a dog attack.

Prof Dubernard, 64, a graduate of Harvard Medical School, performed Europe's first pancreas transplant in 1976. He later garnered worldwide acclaim for being the first surgeon to transplant a hand in 1998, followed by the first double forearm transplant in 2000.

Although mostly eliciting praise, the radical procedure has also prompted warnings about the risk of rejection, side effects from life-long immunosuppressive therapy, and psychological ramifications for both the patient and the donor's relatives. In a 2003 report, Britain's Royal College of Surgeons strongly advised against facial

transplants, while a Spanish ethics committee banned a similar operation in March 2005. In France, the National Advisory Committee on Ethics ruled out full facial transplants in 2004, but left the door open for partial transplants of the nose, chin and mouth area.

(Source: *The Straits Times*)

### **FALL FROM GRACE**

Following the shocking results of an investigation launched by a 9-member panel from Seoul National University, Prof Hwang Woo Suk – best known for cloning an Afghan hound named Snuppy, then following that effort with claims that he had successfully cloned a human embryo and extracted stem cells from it in 2005 – apologised and resigned from his position in December.

The panel censured him for fabricating at least 9 of the 11 “patient-tailored stem cell lines”. Fresh DNA tests indicate that the remaining 2 are also fake, casting serious doubts on whether his so-called “original cloning technology” had ever existed.

Hwang now faces possible criminal charges for misappropriation of state funds as the government had poured in millions of dollars to finance his research. Said Ms Roe Jung Hye, who heads the panel, “This is major misconduct and a grave act that damages the foundation of science.”

Observers have blamed South Korea's hurry-up culture, its deep national pride and craving for international recognition for the debacle. Some postulate that immense pressure from the press and the people “short-circuited stringent verification procedures”, causing those involved to “cut corners”.

Further investigations will address allegations that Snuppy might be a twin created from a split embryo rather than a clone. ■

(Source: *The Straits Times*)