

Fixating on flu figures of no help

<http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/09/06/23/10325138.html>

06/23/2009 07:39 PM | By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News

So the swine flu threat has now been officially graded as a pandemic (an infection that spreads easily between continents), and the UAE as one of the world's great crossroads is, of course, correct to stock-up with enough of the anti-viral drug, Tamiflu, to treat tens of thousands of cases.

As for the likelihood of swine flu actually causing extensive casualties, that is one of the many unknown aspects of this syndrome. It is unlike other infections because it has proved largely curable, although it is liable to mutate. Those who have to monitor the situation should note this high variability factor when interpreting the statistics. Because too much reliance on statistics - especially global ones - can lead to unfortunate errors of judgment.

When my career was just starting in the UK, we had two major threats of disaster, based on various interpretations of statistical information.

First was the so-called 'oil famine', when we were suddenly told that we had over-plundered our planet, the pumps were about to run dry, there would be no more private cars, and we would all have to use public transport. All of this was supported by quite plausible statistics - even though it soon turned out that the crisis had been sparked by a politician who totally misinterpreted the published statistics.

Next came an unusually hot summer in the UK, with record temperatures and reservoirs drying-up. This time it was water that Planet Earth was running out of, and there was no shortage of experts to tell us about it. I vividly remember one scientist on television with a map of America, showing us the drought-pattern that wiped out the huge forests of 12th-century California. His figures certainly seemed to show that we were in the middle of the same devastating cycle, and the government took it seriously enough to appoint a Minister of Water Resources. And what happened inside a few months? So much rain that the same man had to be re-appointed as Minister of Flood!

Now of course it is easy to laugh at these stories with hindsight. But it does show that statistics need to be handled with caution. So what should employers do about preparing for swine flu on a potentially catastrophic scale?

They should, of course, calmly prepare the worst-case scenario, with detailed plans for handling mass absence. But they should not get too distracted by the statistics. Unfortunately, it is a hallmark of the more diligent characters that they become fixated on the figures, and over-react to them. Others respond by wanting to 'cover their backs' in case the worst happens, so that they can say they took every precaution.

In the end, we must try to read the situation correctly. And I suspect the ones who get it right will be the fairly cynical types who make a healthy allowance for the eternal public appetite for disaster stories, backed up by dubious statistics.

Key points: Margin for error

- The swine flu alert deserves sensible precautions and planning
- The statistics of global emergencies can be wildly misleading
- Allow for the public appetite for sensational disaster reports