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Influenza

Epidemiology, economy and racism

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Would one measure the riskiness of diseases by the number of publications in the press, which deal with them, one could come to the conclusion, that the so-called swine-flu is at the moment the worldwide biggest threat to public health. But this is obviously nonsense.

Epidemics and pandemics of influenza since ever take place periodically. The influenza is a viral disease, which has got a high transmissibility and therefore tends to epidemic and pandemic occurrence. Generally it leaves a more or less potent immunity. But the flu-viruses have got the inconvenient talent to be able to mutate very easily, means, they can change their genetic material in a way, that for instance a immunity against the flu-virus of last year doesn't work against the virus of this year and therefore as well the vaccination does not work, because the vaccines regularly can only be produced on the base of the existing virus-types. Especially the influenza type A (there are the types A, B and C) has got this high potential for mutation. Even when there has taken place a considerable mutation of the virus, there can happen a pandemic, a worldwide outbreak of the disease. Worldwide outbreaks took place in 1889, in 1918 (so-called Spanish flu), in 1957 (so-called Asiatic flu), in 1968 (so-called Hong Kong-flu) and in 1977 (so-called Russian flu). However the influenza isn't a especially aggressive disease.

People with an undamaged immune system generally recover without bigger problems. Even the biggest known pandemic in 1918/19 left on the one hand 50 million dead, an incredible number, but on the other hand the mortality of the infected was just 0,2 %. Additionally one has to consider, that this pandemic at the end of First World War hit populations, whose immune systems were severely weakened by the consequences of the war.

If we look to the presently fuelled hysteria, we have to ask the question, why there is such a hype about just another variation of the flu-virus (type A), called misleadingly "swine-flu".

Where does the "swine-flu" come from?

The new type of virus consists of parts of genomes from four different origins. This type of combination until today was not known. The single parts come from a North-American swine-flu virus, from a virus of a North-American bird-flu, a human influenza-virus and a swine-flu virus of an Eurasian type of pigs – the latter until today was not found in the USA. In contrary to the misleading label "swine-flu" the genome of the new virus comes from variants in the first place between humans common and was transmitted until now only from humans to humans, but in the meantime there is one reported case from Canada of transmission from a man to a pig. The epidemiologists are alarmed, because the variant, which causes the bird-flu, is the most aggressive one known so far, with mortality above 50% among humans. But until today there was no transmission of bird-flu between humans. This is apparently different with the new virus.

As far as we know, symptoms and mortality of the new variant are not much different from the yearly waves of "common" influenza.

As usual in these cases, in the last weeks appeared a couple of more or less absurd conspiracy theories respecting the origin of the virus, for example the targeted breeding in a laboratory etc. But all of them have got no plausibility.

One of the more serious assumptions, which the Mexican PRT was pointing to in its statement respecting the origin

of the new virus-type concerns the mass-keeping and breeding of pigs in Mexico. Pigs are generally a reservoir for all the forms of viruses, which attributed to the new type, so it is clearly possible, that the genetic exchange could have taken place in the respiratory tract of pigs. This assumption is backed by the fact, that in the area of the first occurrence in Mexico one of the biggest pig-breeding factories of the world is located, run by a US-multinational. In the same region there are located, what is less known, big bird farms as well. Before the outbreak of the flu there have been rumours about cases of bird-flu, which have been kept secret.

It is undeniable, that the mass-keeping of animals poses a general problem respecting the spread of this kind of germs. It means that the mass keeping most probably plays a role in the origin, but surely in the spread of respective new kinds of pathogenic agents.

However, a fact is, that in the respective region (the Mexican state of Vera Cruz) end of 2008 according to the dates of the health authorities 60% of the population were affected by an atypic infection of the upper respiratory tract.

Alarm – why?

If one looks to the present figures of flu-cases and especially the number of the died people, one has to state, that the hysteria until now is not justified from the point of view of public health. In the USA every year 36 000 people die by “usual” influenza. Fewer people until now died by “swine-flu”. [1] Why the alert of the WHO?

For the present influenza-hype there is not only one reason, but a couple of them. The most important:

– In the “worst case” the new virus could combine the high contagiousity of the “usual” influenza with the aggressivity of the bird-flu and therefore have a much higher mortality than the former types.

– For the vaccine-industry, which cooperates in such cases directly with the public health-authorities, a pandemic is a giant opportunity – the threat alone is enough to boost the sell of vaccines (which are developed just now in high speed) incredibly. The industry has got any interest to feed the hysteria. This was a success already in former times: 1976 there occurred a local outbreak of a new variant of flu-virus in US-soldiers at Fort Dixon, New Jersey. The health authorities of USA started a vaccine-production program and a public campaign, until mid of December 1976 40 millions of US-citizens had been vaccinated – at this time the biggest vaccination campaign of history. Afterwards it came up, that some of the vaccinated had developed a so-called Guillain-Barré syndrome. For the origin of this – until today not completely understood – disease, which is an autoimmune-phenomenon characterised by the development of antibodies against the own nerve-cells of the patient and leads to severe damage, beside other reasons vaccines possibly are responsible. In the fifties for this reason a vaccine already was removed from the market.

– For the producers of antiviral drugs like Oseltamivir a pandemic, if it occurs or not, also is a giant chance. Actually these drugs should be applicated quite cautious: On the one hand the danger of development of resistance is very high. Scientists in the USA concluded out of the data of the flu-season 2008/2009, that about 98% of the virus-samples isolated by them had been resistant against Oseltamivir (“Tamiflu”). Data of the WHO from March 2009 too confirmed in 1291 from 1362 samples taken the high resistance against flu-drugs in the season 2008/2009. On the other hand these so-called virustatika are not at all harmless drugs. Oseltamivir for example possibly causes impaired consciousness and paranoid symptoms in children. After the check of more than 100 cases with abnormal behaviour, among them three with letal outcome, health experts in USA recommended to incorporate an information to the respective drug, to supervise permanently patients taking Tamiflu.

– For the international phalanx of the meat-producing industry a pandemic would be a direct threat to their business. Mass-slaughtering like some years ago in Hong Kong because of the bird-flu would be a economic disaster for them. And there would take place another public debate about mass-keeping of animals as a such – this they like to block at all costs.

– A flu-pandemia is an event, which touches the countries of the North as well directly and which has not only consequences to health, but also to economy because of the massive temporary drop out of workforce. This is a disease, which is not limiting itself to the countries of the South.....

– Besides that in the present political and economic situation for the political class a subject is very convenient, in which they can present themselves as able to act and which leads away from the desperate situation respecting the crisis. And the respective professionals in the scientific field are thankful as well for the suddenly gushing money.

But we have to remind, that every year millions of people die unnecessarily: not only from hunger, but from simple, easily treatable diseases – but usually not in the imperialist metropolises, but in the periphery. It may be plausible from an epidemiological point of view, that there are spent because of the threat of a flu-pandemic already after a handful of cases millions of Euro and that there are started worldwide programs, but it shows at the same time the racism of this kind of health-policy.

For the 1,6 -3 millions of people dying every year from tuberculosis, the 1,5-2,7 millions dying from malaria, means, from diseases, which are very good treatable and curable, (not to talk about the 8,8 millions dying from hunger) there are no giant emergency programs, there is no international media hype, no prophylactic stock of medicine, no free vaccination, no money for research to a comparable extent.

But out of these people you cannot make any money.....

[1] By June 3rd, the virus has infected more than 18,965 people and caused more than 117 deaths.