Most believe bird flu will soon become pandemic

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SURVEY REVEALS HIGH LEVEL OF PUBLIC CONCERN ON BIRD FLU THREAT

With new outbreaks of bird flu announced around the world on a daily basis and policymakers on high alert, a new poll completed this week by global market-information provider TNS reveals an extremely high level of concern and pessimism in Asia about the potential consequences to public health, with many consumers in the region already having made changes to their dietary habits or travel plans as a direct result of the perceived threat.

The TNS 6thdimension poll of more than 2,500 Asians conducted on 25-26 October shows that more than 70 per cent in Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan and more than half in China and Singapore believe that bird flu will be a serious problem within six months. Between one half to three-quarters believe that bird flu could eventually become a pandemic, with the Taiwanese (76 per cent), Singaporeans (74 per cent), and Hong Kongers (68 per cent) being notably pessimistic.

Not surprisingly given the widespread anxiety, many people in Asia have already taken steps to minimise personal risk. As many as 44 per cent in China have adjusted their diets to include less poultry, alongside 39 per cent in Taiwan, 33 per cent in Hong Kong, 29 per cent in Korea and 26 per cent in Singapore. Furthermore, a considerable number of people in Taiwan (22 per cent), Singapore (19 per cent), and Hong Kong (16 per cent) have changed travel plans directly as a result of worries about bird flu.
The TNS survey also reveals that as Asians across the region become increasingly concerned about the potential impact of bird flu, many feel that the authorities are not moving quickly enough to address the threat. As many as 75 per cent of survey respondents in Taiwan, 67 per cent in Korea and 48 per cent in Hong Kong believe that their governmentâ€™s response to the bird flu threat has been less than adequate. (On the other hand, only 8 per cent in Singapore feel this way.)
On a more positive note, a large majority of people in Singapore and Hong Kong, two places that were among the worst afflicted by SARS in 2003, agree that the authorities are better placed today to handle the threat to public health compared with during the SARS period. In Singapore 72 per cent of people believe that the government is more prepared today compared with before, and 70 per cent believe hospitals are better prepared today. In Hong Kong the percentages are 64 per cent and 70 per cent for the government and hospitals respectively.
Across Asia there is strong support for the authorities to implement sweeping preventative measures.

Six in every 10 people across Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore and Taiwan believe that governments should provide public vaccinations against bird flu. As many as 82 per cent in Taiwan and 69 per cent in Korea believe that imports of birds should be prohibited, while the proportion of people in Hong Kong and Singapore who agree with this is comparatively lower but still high at 58 per cent and 50 percent respectively. There is even a sizeable contingent who support the closing of borders in the event of a bird-flu pandemic - the Koreans (45 per cent) being most in favour, followed by Singapore (42 percent) and Hong Kong (37 per cent), with the Taiwanese (24 per cent) being the least enthusiastic.

TNS HK Associate Director Stephen Yap commented: â€œThis survey confirms that the bird flu threat is top of mind for Asians all across the region, and uncovers a growing impatience and sense of urgency around the issue especially in Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan.â€•

â€œWhile the appropriate steps to combat bird flu are still being evaluated, policymakers must also place careful consideration as to how to placate an increasingly alarmed public and provide reassurance that the situation is under control.â€•

This poll was conducted on 25-26 October 2005 by market research group TNS. Fieldwork was conducted in China (Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shanghai), Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan via TNS 6thdimension access panels. A total of n=2,533 interviews were completed with respondents aged 16 to 49.