

## **Recommendations From The UM4H Workshop on Avian Flu and the Media (Jan 29<sup>th</sup> –31<sup>st</sup> 2007), Kampala**

The media sensitising/training workshop for African journalists was attended by 9 journalists from Uganda and 16 from other African countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Cameroon, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo, Togo, and Ethiopia). Financial support was provided by the Commonwealth Media Development Fund (London, UK) and EAGLES Health Project (Madrid, Spain). The facilitators were Julie Clayton, Thomas Egwang, Charles Wendo, Patrick Luganda, and Otulah Owuor. First day highlights included a keynote address by Dr. Nicholas Kauta, the Co-Chair of the Uganda Bird Flu National Task Force and two presentations on the human impact of H5N1 by Mr. Ibrahim Sensasi and Dr. Grace Nanyunja, respectively, from the World Health Organization country office. The second day featured four keynote presentations on the animal and agricultural aspects of H5N1 outbreaks by Dr. Joseph Litamoi from the FAO regional office in Nairobi, and on WHO guidelines for avian influenza preparedness and response by Dr. William Mbabazi of the WHO country office. The presentations covered a wide range of issues about avian influenza, including the possible role of migratory bird populations in spreading the virus, clinical symptoms in humans, national preparedness plans, and the role of communication and the media in responding to avian influenza. The workshop raised awareness of the media about important aspects of disease transmission, the role of poultry production and commerce, wildlife trade (both legal and illegal), and migratory birds.

Several recommendations were made:

1. Despite avian influenza receiving high media attention all over the world, its emergence as a “new” disease means that there is much misinformation and consequently misunderstanding about the virus and the nature of avian influenza. The health community is learning about the virus at the same time as trying to respond appropriately to disease outbreaks and inform the public and other specialists. The media is an important ally in any public health communication strategy. It has the responsibility of being the conduit of correct information as well as an advocate for healthy behaviour and appropriate government policies. But before the media can take on that role, it needs to be empowered by such training workshops.
2. The media should play an active role in tackling the disease immediately any outbreaks occur, a strategy voiced by the FAO and the OIE, and supported by the WHO. The media should also hold governments and other organisations to account if they fail to act promptly to contain avian flu outbreaks.
3. Journalists/media houses should provide more coverage for bird flu and other health and agricultural issues.
4. Innovative ways to sell bird flu stories should be explored. Story ideas based on providing useful information and containing in-depth interviews should be encouraged.
5. Despite all efforts already in place, the H5N1 virus continues to spread in Africa. Stopping it will require comprehensive and sustained efforts from national governments as well as the international community. Journalists can help by keeping awareness and interest alive.
6. Funding is critically required from international agencies, donors and partner institutions to train science journalists to give appropriate information especially on emerging diseases. This can be in terms of fellowships, graduate studies and short term training.

7. More workshops should be held to sensitise science journalists on the status, developments and challenges faced while dealing with other diseases e.g. malaria, HIV and tuberculosis. This would help foster broader necessary skills for conveying accurate and timely information to the public.
8. An African-wide media network devoted to handling bird flu and other pressing issues needs to be established.
9. Journalists were urged to apply their workshop training immediately through reporting about avian flu for their local newspaper and/ or news station. And many have indicated that they are doing this already.