

UK urged to stockpile two anti-bird flu drugs

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LONDON (Reuters) - Britain should stockpile more than one antiviral drug to tackle any bird flu pandemic and appoint an independent flu specialist as a special adviser to the government, scientists said on Monday.

The Royal Society, an academy of leading scientists, is concerned the H5N1 avian virus, which public health experts fear could develop into a pandemic strain, might develop resistance to Tamiflu made by Swiss drug giant Roche AG.

To overcome any potential problems, the scientists recommended in a report the government should also stockpile GlaxoSmithKline Plc's antiviral drug Relenza. John Skehel, chairman of the working group that produced the report, told a news conference strains of the virus resistant to Tamiflu have appeared when the drug had been used against seasonal influenza and in a small number of patients infected with H5N1.

"It is known...that not all viruses that are resistant to Tamiflu are also resistant to Relenza. That is the specific basis for recommending a joint stockpile of the two," he said.

Britain has stockpiled about 14.6 million treatment courses of Tamiflu at a cost of around 200 million pounds (\$380 million).

Although the drug will not prevent a future pandemic, scientists believe it could mitigate its effects and may slow the spread of a pandemic until a specific vaccine is developed.

H5N1 still mainly infects birds. There have been 258 cases in people and 153 deaths. Health experts fear the virus could mutate into a strain that could become highly infectious in humans and spark a pandemic capable of killing millions.

The Royal Society praised Britain's contingency plans against a future flu pandemic but said the government was not making the best use of independent scientific advice in formulating its policies.

"We want to insure that scientific knowledge is kept up to date," said Skehel.

The Society believes an influenza specialist could contribute expertise in formulating policy and act as a model for how Britain responds to other future emergencies.

The report also encouraged academic researchers and leading pharmaceutical companies to work on improving vaccines which will be fundamental weapons in the battle against a pandemic.

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