WHAT ABOUT INFLUENZA?

Dr. Alan Scheidt
Pfizer Animal Health
Swine Veterinary Services

Introduction
I would like for you to imagine living near an active volcano. The threat of an eruption is constant and the danger is real. You live in the shadow of the volcano and while quiet there is no problem; however, when the volcano erupts your home and life are in danger. Influenza viruses pose a serious threat and a very real danger to people and animals. Why is this alarming thought of concern to us? Influenza viruses cause illness in many different animals and birds as well as people. There are 3 things to consider about influenza viruses. First, historically during 1914 to 1918 there was a world wide pandemic that resulted in 20 million people dying with pneumonia caused by swine influenza. Second, influenza viruses infect many species of animals and birds and are capable of infecting people. Third, influenza viruses change on a regular basis and then evade protection by your or an animal’s immune system resulting in illness. Sometimes the respiratory illness caused by influenza virus results in death especially in very young and older persons.

The historical pandemic of swine influenza that resulted in 20 million human deaths around the world occurred during World War I. Movement of troops around the globe exposed many people who had no protection against the virus. The resulting sickness and the absence of treatments against the infection were devastating. Today there is considerable concern about “bird Flu.” This avian strain of influenza has caused some human deaths particularly in Asia. If this is a new strain of influenza, then the opportunity for it to cause pneumonia in people is real. If it is a new strain of influenza and people have no immunity, then it could spread rapidly causing pneumonia possibly even death. That would be the volcano erupting in our lives.

Influenza viruses infect many different species of animals and birds and people. It is known that influenza viruses from birds will infect pigs and can infect people. Wild migratory birds are known to carry, shed, and transmit influenza viruses. Domestic poultry including chickens and turkeys are a source of influenza viruses. Hence, the population dense areas of Asia and Southeast Asia where birds, pigs, and people are living in close proximity make it easy for influenza viruses to move between them. Similarly, livestock and poultry farms make it easy for influenza viruses to infect animals and birds being raised there. People working inside or near these farms may also encounter the virus and are at risk for pneumonia. In a sense we are living near the volcano because of the exposure to influenza viruses and the potential to become infected. If an influenza virus infects us and we have no protection, then sickness is possible.

Influenza viruses change frequently and they are capable of changing with more than one method. In some cases the change is subtle and goes undetected. In other cases the change is more dramatic and clinical disease is a result. This happens with pigs, birds, and
other animals and it can happen to people also. Living near and working in barns where livestock and poultry are raised is like living near a volcano. We live there for many years without becoming sick with influenza disease. One option is to be vaccinated annually for influenza using the human strains of influenza vaccine. Vaccination for influenza is recommended for all persons 50 years of age and older living in our society. Those of us working in or near poultry or livestock barns and less than 50 years of age should consider receiving the annual influenza vaccination in order to provide immunity. The immunity is for strains of influenza causing disease in people, but some immunity may be beneficial in protecting us against exposure to animal strains of influenza.

Why is influenza of concern and similar to living near a volcano? As long as the volcano is quiet, then there is no problem. As long as the strains of influenza in pigs and poultry do not infect people, then there is no worry. However, the potential for influenza to change and to infect people is real and that could result in pneumonia in people.