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Swine Flu or North American Flu?

The international organization that manages the fight against animal diseases globally said Monday that the flu virus now spreading around the world would more accurately be called “North American influenza” rather than “swine flu.”

The Office International des Epizooties, commonly known by the acronym OIE or World Organization for Animal Health, said the current influenza, because it contains avian and human components and because no pig has been found ill, would more accurately be called the North American influenza, based on its geographic origin.

OIE compared its preference for the geographic naming of this influenza to the Spanish influenza, a human flu pandemic with animal origin that killed more than 50 million people in 1918-1919. The current flu has not reached pandemic proportions.

“The virus has not been isolated in animals to date. Therefore, it is not justified to name this disease swine influenza,” the Paris-based organization said in a statement.

According to Peter Cowen, associate professor of epidemiology and public health at North Carolina State University, the H1N1 virus is being called “swine flu” because of the 1918 outbreak in Spain. That virus, Cowen said, probably had a wild bird origin but nonetheless became known as the swine influenza virus because it caused significant mortality in both swine and human populations.

Cowen, as did the OIE, notes that it appears no exposure to swine has occurred among people who have come down with the current novel H1N1 virus.

The reason this virus is being called swine flu, Cowen said, “is the history and evolution of the virus. It also rests on the fact the some of the genetic analysis indicates that elements from viruses that have traditionally been found in swine populations are incorporated.

“However, since we know nothing of how this virus has gotten into the human population but there apparently is no history of swine exposure, it probably makes more sense epidemiologically to refer this simply as an H1N1 virus.”

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Cowen noted that the H5N1 virus prevalent in Asia was known as avian influenza or bird flu, but that it, over time, is becoming known by its viral strain, rather than bird flu.

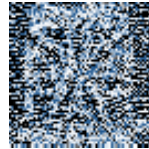
As for the widespread public use of the term swine flu, Cowen said it's unfortunate because the name implies a simple, zoonotic transmission between swine and people, when in reality, its origin and epidemiology is likely to be much more complex.

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