

Did the WHO Knowingly Hype Swine Flu?

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Theme: [Science and Medicine, United Nations](#)

In-depth Report: [THE H1N1 SWINE FLU PANDEMIC](#)

Having spread H1N1 swine flu hysteria for nearly a year, the World Health Organization's "swine flu czar," Keiji Fukuda, last week finally "[fessed up](#)" to agency wrongdoing. But it's like listening to Enron admitting to a tabulation error. "I think we did not convey the uncertainty" about the risks of the flu strain, he said.

Sorry, but this was no poor communications problem. Indeed, earlier this year Wolfgang Wodarg, an epidemiologist with the [Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe](#), [accused the WHO](#) of creating a "false pandemic" that's "one of the greatest medicine scandals of the century."

At the least, by portraying as a raging razorback what proved to be more of a pathetic piglet, the WHO needlessly scared the public, wasted vast billions of dollars, destroyed the value of the term "flu pandemic" and perhaps left the organization's reputation "tarnished" and "irreparably damaged," [as one authority put it](#).

A year ago, Fukuda [was comparing](#) swine flu's potential with the [Spanish flu](#), which killed an estimated 20 million to 50 million worldwide in 1918-19, with more than half a million here. ([Extrapolating to today's population](#), that would be 1.5 million.) Now, with the annual U.S. epidemic ending, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates we've had [had perhaps 12,000 total deaths](#) — a third of the [usual number](#). ([Almost all the infections](#) this year were swine flu.) [About 140 million doses](#) of swine flu vaccine appeared headed for the trash heap. [France](#) and [Japan](#) say their epidemics have been far milder. Last July an [Associated Press headline declared](#), "Britain Braces for 100,000 Swine Flu Cases a Day." [Actual deaths](#): 457.

It's not as if the WHO knew nothing about the mildness of H1N1 early on. I [wrote about it](#) on May 1, subsequently [publishing 14 articles](#) in major publications on what I immediately dubbed hysteria. If I knew better, there's no reason the WHO shouldn't have known better.

Indeed, when the WHO [officially labeled swine flu a pandemic](#) in June, it was [11 weeks into the outbreak](#), and yet fewer people had died worldwide ([144](#)) than succumb to seasonal flu every few *hours*.

In contrast, the *mildest* true pandemic in the 20th century killed at least [a million](#) people. A [recent WHO document](#) stated that "best-case scenarios" of a new pandemic "project global excess deaths in the range of 2 million to 7.4 million," and the WHO's own [official definition](#) required "simultaneous epidemics worldwide with enormous numbers of deaths and illness."

Slapping the "pandemic" label onto swine flu directly led to the [President's Council of](#)

[Advisors on Science and Technology](#)'s "plausible scenario" of as many as 90,000 excess flu deaths, while flu book author John Barry [told Washington Post readers](#) to expect "89,000 to 207,000" extra deaths. Yet in Australia, with the epidemic already well under way and no vaccine, people [were dying at a lower rate](#).

So given the mild course swine flu was taking, how could the WHO justify declaring a pandemic? Easy. It [rewrote the definition](#)! The new one, [viewable here](#) and published last July, simply eliminates severity as a factor. This renders the definition meaningless, since flu *always* causes "simultaneous epidemics worldwide." Instead, it closely matched the new definition to swine flu by [requiring that the strain](#) contain either animal or mixed-human animal genetic material.

Now, Fukuda and other WHO officials insist the definition was never changed. In a January virtual conference, Fukuda [stated](#), "Did WHO change its definition of a pandemic? The answer is no: WHO did not change its definition." Two weeks later, on tape at a press conference, [he insisted](#), "Having severe deaths has never been part of the WHO definition."

Meanwhile, [here's a news item](#) from last May in which Fukuda himself discusses the forthcoming change, and [here's](#) an official 2009 WHO report explaining the change in retrospect. You know, the change that never occurred.

You don't vociferously deny doing something you obviously did with no reason. So what was it?

In part, it was CYA for the WHO. The agency was losing credibility over the refusal of [avian flu H5N1](#) to kill as many as [150 million people](#) worldwide, as its "avian flu czar" had predicted in 2005. Around the world, nations heeded the warnings and spent vast sums developing vaccines and making other preparations. So when swine flu conveniently trotted in, the WHO essentially crossed out "avian," inserted "swine" and WHO Director-General [Margaret Chan](#) arrogantly [boasted](#), "The world can now reap the benefits of investments over the last five years in pandemic preparedness."

But the WHO also saw an opportunity to push a political agenda.

In a [September speech](#), Chan said the swine flu pandemic should be exploited to fight for "changes in the functioning of the global economy," and to "distribute wealth on the basis of" values "like community, solidarity, equity and social justice." And this is supposed to be a *health* agency?

It would help explain why the agency hyped avian flu, why in the 1980s it [exaggerated HIV infections](#) by as much as [12-fold](#) and why [it spread hysteria](#) over [severe acute respiratory syndrome](#) (SARS) in 2003. SARS [ultimately killed](#) a day's worth of seasonal flu victims (and no Americans) before vanishing.

Yet with one cry of "wolf!" after another, says Europe's Wodarg, the WHO is merely destroying "much of the credibility" we'll need if there does appear "a killer on a large scale."

Sadly, with the swine flu debacle, that credibility may already have vanished.

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