

Article by Larry Butler, Principal Deputy High Representative: “Ostrich Politics Not Good Enough When It Comes to Public Health”

Bird flu has infected around 120 people in Asia since late 2003 and killed more than 60. It isn't a pandemic – and it doesn't have to become one. Currently, the risk of infection by a deadly strain of bird flu is infinitely smaller than the risk of infection by a seasonal, non-fatal flu virus. This risk can be kept low if the authorities around the world take sensible and effective steps and apply internationally acceptable standards of animal health management. This virus, like any other virus, can be identified quickly and prevented from spreading.

Which is what state veterinary services are for.

Currently the responsible BiH authorities at the state level are taking sensible and effective steps – in the matter of bird flu. However, other aspects of the animal health and human health safety must be treated with the same attention at the Entity level too.

After years of unnecessary delay, the state Veterinary Agency (SVA) is now thankfully able to discharge, to a greater or lesser extent, all of its duties. These include drafting legislation, managing veterinary inspections at border crossings, certifying inspection facilities for imported/exported food, and inspecting companies that are engaged in the import or export of food.

The SVA is one of the principal bodies charged with ensuring that the animal-origin food we eat is safe.

At the Entity level, the problem of animal health (which directly affects food safety) and human health is acute.

According to available data, 1259 animals were infected with brucellosis in the Federation between January 2004 and June 2005. Over the same period 147 citizens were also infected in the Federation. In October this year the number of humans infected rose, following a brucellosis outbreak in the Zeljezno Polje, Zepce Municipality. Herzegovina-Neretva is also reported to be a brucellosis hotspot, as are Sarajevo, Zenica-Doboj, and Central Bosnia Canton.

Brucellosis can be fatal if it isn't treated properly. It is transmitted from animals to humans through direct contact or through consumption of fresh meat that has not been thermally processed. With proper animal-health supervision, fatalities should be prevented. In the Federation, however, this provision is inadequate.

Despite the recent brucellosis outbreak – a rare occurrence in Europe and an exceptionally worrying one for BiH – reaction by the responsible Federation institutions has been minimal. The authorities have undertaken corrective measures to deal with the results of the outbreak, but they haven't taken *preventative* measures of the kind that will stop future outbreaks.

An additional worrying fact is that brucellosis did not use to be a problem in BiH. It has only been recorded in the last 15 years, with the original infection originating outside the country.

I have written to Federation Prime Minister Hadzipasic urging him to take this matter in hand. Urgent steps must be taken in order to improve the quality of veterinary services in the Federation and therefore to minimise the possibility of future

outbreaks of brucellosis and other animal-human communicated diseases.

- The Federation veterinary inspection system must be upgraded.
- A thorough investigation into the causes of the brucellosis outbreak must be undertaken.
- The Federation Veterinary Chamber – which has direct responsibility for certain public functions, such as educating and licensing veterinarians – must be made operational without further delay. This has not yet happened simply because the Federation Government has failed to adopt a part of the Chamber's statute, a procedural matter that is having a huge and damaging impact on animal and human health safety.

Brucellosis and other types of animal-human communicated infection are a scourge with which we must live. In a world where food products are transnational and where cattle and poultry are traded at speed and in huge volume there are unavoidable challenges in regard to food and human safety.

But we can meet those challenges. We can take sensible and effective steps. Failing to establish and operate the institutions that will ensure that these steps are taken is nothing short of a scandal. Copying the Ostrich's response to danger, burying his head and pretending that there isn't a problem, not only won't make it go away, it is a recipe for making sure it gets worse. Politics as usual isn't good enough when it comes to public health.