

# Prognosis for bird flu still alarming

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The man who 40 years ago predicted the origin of pandemic influenza says seeing his hunch come true would be thrilling if it were not so terrifying.

Robert Webster was a young New Zealand microbiologist when he demonstrated the microbe that swept the globe in 1957 as "Asian flu" was similar to strains of virus carried by certain birds in the years before, The Washington Post reported Tuesday.

Today, Webster, now 73, says he's deeply worried by strains of an influenza virus known as A/H5N1 that have been spreading in birds across Southeast Asia and China since 1996.

What has Webster and other experts so worried is the mortality rate of more than 55 percent among the 112 people who have been infected with the H5N1 "bird flu." Such a fatality rate outstrips any human flu epidemic on record, including the epochal Spanish flu of 1918 and 1919 that killed at least 50 million people.

He told the Post he believes an avian flu pandemic "is just inevitable and says nations should be preparing plans to limit human movement should a pandemic flu strain emerge.

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