

What swine flu tells us about global cooperation

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Thursday, April 30, 2009 - 3:25 PM

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Potential pandemics appear to be one of those issue-areas where global cooperation works pretty well. By most accounts the response to SARS back in 2003 did a fairly good job of containing what might have been a much more serious problem. By contrast, the global response to climate change has been much more halting, and collaboration in other areas (the Doha Round, arms reductions, etc.) has been even more disappointing in recent years.

I think there are three features of the pandemic problem that encourage effective international collaboration. **First**, the dangers are immediate and somewhat indiscriminate, in the sense that lots of countries are likely to be affected and within a relatively short time-horizon. Mishandling a pandemic would not only impose major short term costs, it could also affect the political fortunes of incumbent politicians around the world. So nobody sits around twiddling their thumbs. Global warming, by contrast, is a long-range danger, which makes it easier for today's politicians to waste a lot of time haggling and push the problem off on future generations.

Second, pandemics are not an issue where "relative gains" loom large. States don't see this as an opportunity to improve their strategic position by getting others to bear all the costs or by trying to free-ride (or god forbid, by trying to encourage the disease to spread to one's rivals). Infectious diseases are too mobile and the world is too interconnected for that approach. If Country A responds vigorously but Country B does not, B is likely to have a more serious problem. But the worse things are for B, the bigger the problem that A might face (think Mexico and the US in this regard). This situation encourages joint efforts, and makes it more likely that each state will do all that it can to contain the danger and mitigate

the effects.

Third, public health is a highly professionalized and comparatively de-politicized field, and the relevant international and national institutions (e.g., the World Health Organization) have a lot of prior experience. Many of the responses to these events are based on uncontroversial science and straightforward best practices, which means there is less debate about what measures to take and less time spent trying to devise solutions. One might contrast this with the current economic mess, where different national authorities have rather different ideas about the best way to respond and international coordination has been pretty paltry.

All this is not to say that the global response will be perfect, or that the potential pandemic will be contained as effectively as SARS ultimately was. But it does remind us that global cooperation is possible, and that some global institutions do provide valuable protection. Libertarian neo-isolationists and neoconservative institution-bashers should take note.