

# The real winter pandemic is bad statistics

David Spiegelhalter

What should we listen to? Media stories about the return of "killer swine flu": 39 dead so far, 42 children under five in critical care beds, and five times the number of flu cases compared with this time last year? Or the official line that swine flu is now just the new seasonal flu that will probably last only a few more weeks and that there is no need to vaccinate healthy children?

Maybe both could be right. The term "swine flu" still carries a shiver factor, but we now know after the experience of last year that it is generally mild, with one death for every 2,000 people who get ill, though it has a tendency to affect some younger people severely. Half the reported fatalities were under 42 years old.

The focus on emotional stories about individual victims misses something important. The Office for National Statistics has just reported that in the week up to December 10 there were 11,193 deaths in England and Wales from all causes: this is an extraordinary jump of around 2,000 in a week and is 10 per cent higher than usual at this time of year. Things could get even worse: consultation rates for flu-like illnesses are tracking those of 1999/2000, which was a very severe flu season with 48,000 excess deaths compared with 25,000 last winter, which was around average (swine flu made a negligible contribution).

Sadly it's remarkably easy to talk about these deaths — hundreds every day, mostly old people getting pneumonia and dying earlier than they need have — as if they are in some way inevitable. Stalin had a point.

Sometimes, however, statistics do make news, which makes it even more woeful when they prove hopelessly wrong. In July 2009 Sir Liam

## We know from last year that swine flu is generally mild

Donaldson, then the Chief Medical Officer, reported that the Government was planning for a "reasonable worst-case scenario" of up to 65,000 swine flu deaths. The actual total was 500.

The official post mortems of the handling of the pandemic reveal behind-the-scenes disputes between Sir Liam and the mathematical modellers. Each have tried to distance themselves from the 65,000 figure. The modellers say the CMO did a naive calculation using outdated risk estimates that assumed an implausible "perfect storm" of a pandemic. Sir Liam claims he didn't like the modellers' estimates so he asked his own team to do back-of-the-envelope calculations that he did not publicise.

It would be funny if it were not so important. But will they sort out the mess before the next pandemic? I certainly wouldn't want to predict that.

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