Concern or Panic? H1N1 Outbreak & Society’s Response

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Disease is not new, neither are epidemics. But with the rise of mass multimedia and improved communication and travel between once far-flung areas, news, people, and diseases can travel faster and farther than ever before. Not only can disease travel to areas where it had not been present before, word of the disease can arrive faster. If unchecked, this can cause panic.

Influenza H1N1, also called swine flu, officially emerged in Mexico in April 2009, and soon spread around the world. But did society with legitimate concern, or with panic? Often, when people seek to keep the people calm by underplaying the extent to which a problem has spread, it creates more panic. This happened during the 1917-18 Spanish flu outbreaks, which public officials denied the extent of, to the deaths of thousands. Another problem is people overreacting to something that are not as bad as it appeared, either through their own fear or because of the media exaggerating the extent of the problem. The question with the latest flu pandemic is whether it was one worthy of panic, or did society play off each other’s fears and drive the panic higher than necessary?

Disease is something that can never truly be fully eliminated, as it mutates and evolves much faster than humans can destroy it. Concern about disease and what happens when it gets out of control or cannot be treated is healthy, but panic only breeds more of itself and is counterproductive to fighting disease.