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UT Southwestern infectious-disease specialists to discuss bird flu at public forum

DALLAS – May 8, 2006 – Southwestern Medical Foundation will host a May 25 public forum at UT Southwestern Medical Center designed to educate the public about avian influenza, commonly known as bird flu.

Three infectious disease experts from UT Southwestern will cover all aspects of influenza, from a history of pandemics to vaccination programs and the management of such diseases. The event entitled, “*Bird Flu: How Concerned Should I Be?*” is free and open to the public.

Sponsored by the Southwestern Medical Foundation, the one hour forum, which will include a question-and-answer session following the experts’ presentations, begins at 6 p.m. in the Tom and Lula Gooch Auditorium on the UT Southwestern main campus, 5323 Harry Hines Blvd.

Dr. Robert Haley, chief of epidemiology at UT Southwestern, will moderate the discussion. Forum panelists will include Drs. Robert Munford, Beth Levine and James Luby.

“With the spread of bird flu and the possibility of it mutating to a human-to-human strain capable of causing a pandemic, UT Southwestern is providing a forum based on scientific information about the disease,” Dr. Haley said. “We hope to increase public understanding of the potential for a worldwide human pandemic and the scientific basis for control measures that would be implemented if such an event were to affect Dallas.”

Dr. Haley started his career in the study of disease epidemiology at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and founded UT Southwestern’s division of epidemiology in 1983. He is director of the division and holder of the U.S. Armed Forces Veterans Distinguished Chair for Medical Research, Honoring America’s Gulf War Veterans.

Influenza A virus subtype H5N1 is capable of causing illness in many species, including humans. A strain of this virus has spread rapidly almost worldwide among domesticated and wild birds. A number of countries have supported mass culling programs for sick birds in an attempt to control the spread of bird flu.

There is no evidence that suggests human-to-human transmission of the virus currently exists. However, there have been more than 180 cases of humans contracting the flu through extensive close contact with infected birds.

The incidence of influenza outbreaks have been documented throughout the course of human history. Dr. Munford, professor of internal medicine and microbiology and holder of the Jan and Henri Bromberg Chair in Internal Medicine, has a great interest in the epidemiology of disease outbreaks and the human body's immune response to such diseases. He will discuss the history of influenza.

Dr. Levine, professor of internal medicine and microbiology, holder of the Jay P. Sanford Professorship in Infectious Diseases and chief of the division of infectious diseases, is an internationally recognized specialist in the study of RNA viruses. She will discuss how influenza virus can mutate within the body and spread.

Dr. Luby, professor of internal medicine, has had an interest in influenza virus, influenza vaccines and antiviral chemotherapy throughout his career at UT Southwestern. He will discuss vaccines and antiviral drugs.

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