the coming (cytokine) storm

April 27, 2009 By Paul Dalton

The Swine Flu is story number one on most people's minds. Here are some titdbits.

- The terms 'swine flu' and 'bird flu' and 'avian flu' have always puzzled me. All influenza viruses circulate through both pigs and birds- some making there way to humans.\

- Read a story that some are calling for this outbreak to be renamed, 'Mexican Flu' out of respect for Muslim and Jewish sensibilities around pork. I am tempted to rant about this, but will leave it at: good luck with that.

- One of the scary aspects of this story is that young, healthy people are dying from the flu. The flu kills many people, every year- but they are most often very young (under 3 years old) or very old, often the elderly who are confined to bed. The large pandemic flu outbreaks- 1918, 1957 and 1968- all killed a high proportion of young and otherwise healthy people.

The theory here is that these influenza strains trigger a 'cytokine storm'- an overly aggressive immune system response- which overwhelms tissues, particularly in the lungs. This was also hypothesized as part of the SARS outbreak.

While it is typically thought that people with HIV are at higher risk of catching the flu, and of experiencing sever symptoms, could it be that in these cases the opposite could turn out to be true?

During the SARS outbreak, I read somewhere that in China, SARS ran rampant throughout this one hospital- but left the AIDS ward virtually untouched. Could it have been that the people in that AIDS ward had immune systems that were too weak to cook up a cytokine storm? Thing that make you go, hmmm?

Now, I am not suggesting that the key to surviving this flu scare is to go off your meds and make sure your immune system is weak enough to avoid the cytokine storm. Not at all. I am just thinking outloud.

- Heard through the grapevine that a doctor who I admire and respect talked about this flu outbreak with a group of infectious disease experts and they are confident that this will blow over. Cheers to that.

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