



Swine flu 'a trial run', WHO director tells ANU conference

By Natasha Rudra

The World Health Organization could change the way it declares a flu pandemic as a result of the global swine flu outbreak, according to one of the organisation's senior experts.

Dr Tikki Pang, the WHO's director of research policy and cooperation, said the organisation was mindful of the "scare factor" every time it declared a global flu pandemic.

The organisation was now thinking about describing flu outbreaks according to the spread and severity of the disease.

"In this case, swine influenza would be phase 6, in other words rapid spread, and category 1, a mild disease. In the case of avian influenza we would say phase 1, because [it has not spread to] many countries but category 5, because it's much more severe," he said.

"So we're looking to make these standards, if you like, much more relevant and of much more practical value."

Dr Pang said the global response to swine flu showed many countries had learnt lessons from the SARS [severe



SCARE: A woman takes precautions

acute respiratory syndrome] outbreak in 2003.

"Following SARS every country developed their own national pandemic plan and, in a way, I see this last three or four months as a way to test how countries are prepared," he said.

"In a way, it's good that [swine flu is] a mild disease, so it's like a trial run to see how quickly you could put systems in place."

Dr Pang was speaking in Canberra at the Australian National University yesterday about the WHO and its response to global health crises.

He said there were vast inequities between the rich and poor nations when it came to health care and urged Australia to better support the health systems of poorer neighbours such as East Timor.

"Australia has a key role to play as a global citizen, not just in pandemic influenza, but in many of these other things, strengthening of health-care responsibilities," he said.

Dr Pang said many Australian Government agencies did not offer long-term aid packages which improved a developing country's overall health system.

"It's very fashionable for a particular agency to say 'We want to give money to treat malaria', or 'We want to give money to reduce the number of HIV/AIDs sufferers'. Very few are willing to give money to strengthen the whole system," he said.

Dr Pang will speak in Melbourne later this week at the General Practice in Primary Health Care Research conference.