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Better anti-viral drugs urged

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Scientists from around the world have convened on Trent University to figure out how to fight a possible avian flu pandemic.

A chief concern for the 70 scientists at the university is the growing human resistance to Tamiflu, the anti-viral stockpiled by the government to combat a possible avian influenza pandemic.

Dr. Jeremy Carver, CEO and co-founder of the International Consortium on Anti-Virals, said there needs to be a broader array of anti-viral drugs available to fight a pandemic.

About 24 per cent of Canadians show resistance to Tamiflu, Carver said, and that number is a huge surprise.

"We're still searching for answers as to how this happened," Carver said.

Scientists have spent much of the symposium discussing how to introduce new anti-virals into the marketplace.

Dr. Albert Osterhaus, a virologist from Rotterdam, The Netherlands, said the growing resistance to the anti-viral doesn't mean that it's useless.

What it means, he said, is that a combination of drugs will be needed to combat an avian flu pandemic.

Avian influenza hasn't hit the Americas yet, Osterhaus said, but its presence in Africa and Asia signals a warning bell.

"The questions is if it's going to come here in the future," Osterhaus said.

"Canada isn't completely prepared."

Dr. Malik Peiris, a professor of microbiology at the University of Hong Kong, said scientists must work harder and faster.

"This is a warning bell that resistance is a reality," Peiris said.

The conference, he said, has already proven successful.

"Already, at this meeting, two or three collaborations have emerged, and that's how science works," he said.

Dr. Bamidele Solomon, a professor and director-general of the National Biotechnology Development Agency in Nigeria, shared his country's

experience with avian flu at the conference.

The first human death from the avian flu virus happened in Nigeria ilast year.

Nigeria, Solomon said, reacted instantly.

"Thousands of birds had to be slaughtered and disposed of," Solomon said.

Part of the problem, he said, is monitoring all the different species of birds, domestic and wild, in the country.

"The African environment is open to so many influxes of birds," Solomon said.

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