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Epidemic survivors may be key on bird flu

By Carolyn Thompson
Associated Press

May 21, 2006

BUFFALO -- A 92-year-old woman who fought off the Spanish flu in 1918 is among the influenza survivors lending their blood to researchers who, with the threat of bird flu looming, are hoping to develop more effective vaccines.

Dorothy Horsch remembers falling ill as a kindergartner as the Spanish influenza epidemic that killed 20 million to 40 million victims worldwide swept through Buffalo.

"My mother and father and sister and I, all four of us had it and all four of us survived. That was a miracle," Horsch said Friday from her suburban residence.

"All we did was lay in bed," she said.

Horsch was in and out of consciousness with fever; she doesn't know for how long. Eventually, helped by twice-daily house calls from the family doctor, she and her family recovered.

Now Horsch's blood will be part of a catalog of blood and bone marrow samples being compiled by Sea Lane Biotechnologies of Menlo Park, Calif., which hopes to track changes in the virus with an eye toward more effective vaccines.

"We're looking at the different human responses to the various flus over the course of history," including the Spanish flu and Hong Kong flu, said Michael Horowitz, general counsel for the company.

The goal, Horowitz said, is to obtain samples of antibodies produced by the survivors that allowed them to fight off the infection and then zero in on the most effective ones.

"The idea of identifying antibodies or immune responses from people who have recovered from the Spanish flu of 1918-1919 is clever in a way, because that's the kind of immune response that we would want to reproduce with vaccines that we would develop now for the [avian influenza] virus," said Dr. Timothy Murphy, a professor of medicine and microbiology and chief of infectious diseases at the University at Buffalo.

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"In a way, this is looking at a success," said Murphy. "It's looking at an immune response that effectively, apparently, allowed a person to survive."

Dr. Jeffrey Runge, the Homeland Security Department's chief medical officer, said last week that it is only a matter of time before bird flu hits the United States. But it won't pose a critical threat until the virus can spread consistently between people, he said.

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