

Beat the Press

The hand that rules the press...rules the country—Judge Learned Hand

Chicken Little Gets the Flu

By Chris Weinkopf

The story hit late in January, and it barely made a ripple. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were releasing 4.4 million surplus, leftover doses of flu vaccine, while removing almost all restrictions on their distribution. The reason, as the *Los Angeles Times* reported, was “to ensure that remaining vaccine stocks were not wasted.”

Wasted? Wait a minute, what happened to the widespread reports only three months earlier of a massive *shortage* of flu vaccines—you know, the one that drove seniors to line up outside of health clinics like it was bread day in the old USSR? The one that inspired thousands of journalists across the country to break out the word “pandemic”? The one CNN’s Wolf Blitzer described as “a worst-case scenario at the worst possible time”?

Back in October, the U.S. government announced that, due to contamination at the plant of a British supplier, only about 55 million of the 100 million flu-vaccine doses the nation had ordered would be available. Almost uniformly, the media predicted calamity. “What will be the impact of the U.S. losing half its supply of flu vaccine?” asked the *Chicago Tribune*. The answer: “ER doctors predict a crush of flu cases that will overwhelm an already fragile system, forcing sick and elderly patients to lie on gurneys for hours, squeezing out others who need emergency care.”

But somehow, the deadly and much-trumpeted Great Influenza Epidemic of 2004-05 never quite came to be. And

the entire episode serves as an object lesson that the combined forces of media hype and media bias can be even more dangerous to your health than the occasional viral contagion.

Some 90 million Americans fall into the “high risk” categories for which doctors recommend a flu vaccination, but in a typical year, only about half of them bother to get a shot. So if normal rates held, the country’s 55 million doses would have been plenty to cover all those who needed them. With the government calling on younger and healthier Americans to forego their shots, the supply eventually proved to be *more* than adequate—so much so that by January the fear became that much of it would go to waste.

But hold on. If vaccine stocks held out because so many people skipped their shots, then millions of Americans must have run around this winter uninoculated. And isn’t that the very danger the media warned us about? Pestilence, death, ERs jammed, billions drained in sicktime and lost economic productivity, old people stuck on gurneys? So what happened?

This is the flu we’re talking about, not the plague. That subtle distinction was lost on the news organizations that carried on as though influenza were the fifth horseman. People get the flu all the time. It’s icky. It’s unpleasant. But with the exception of the very weak or very old, it rarely causes more than a few days of discomfort. (And, according to a National Institutes of Health study released in February, 30 years of giving flu shots to the elderly hasn’t saved a single life.)



So why did this story get the Chicken Little treatment?

The obvious explanation is good old-fashioned sensationalism. There’s nothing quite like catastrophe, real or imagined, to whip up an audience.

But politics also played a role. With the Presidential election less than a month away, the establishment press and the Kerry campaign took great delight in spinning the vaccination shortage as the fault of the Bush administration, as proof of this White House’s incompetence and lack of compassion. “The flu-shot problem could have happened under any President,” wrote the *L.A. Times* editorial page, “but it was more likely to happen under this one because preventive measures conflict with his ideology.”

In the end, the hype didn’t flip the election. Whether it made it closer than it would have been, we don’t know. But it definitely did scare the daylight out of a good number of people, most of them elderly. In October, well before the onset of flu season, a 79-year-old northern California woman, Marie Franklin, waited for more than five hours—unnecessarily, it turns out—in front of a supermarket to get a flu shot. She got tired and began to walk toward the shade when she collapsed, hit her head, and died.

Ironically, Mrs. Franklin might turn out to be the one true victim of the Great Influenza Epidemic That Never Was. And it wasn’t even the flu or the lack of a vaccine that was the cause—it was media overkill.

