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## Congress of the United States

May 31, 2006

Committee on Education  
and the Workforce  
Permanent Select Committee  
on Intelligence  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Intelligence Policy  
Co-Chair  
Children's Environmental Health Caucus  
Member  
Congressional Arts Caucus  
Internet Caucus  
Law Enforcement Caucus  
Historic Preservation Caucus

Michael Leavitt  
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services  
200 Independence Ave. Sw  
Washington, D.C. 20201-0001

Dear Secretary Leavitt:

I welcome you to Central New Jersey for your Pandemic Influenza Planning Summit, to be held today on the campus of Douglass College. Your visit to discuss avian and pandemic influenza is timely, as just in the past month six members of a single family in Indonesia died in an avian influenza cluster.

What makes this outbreak particularly troubling is that it appears to be a cluster of human-to-human transmission, rather than direct infection from birds. The possibility of widespread human-to-human transmission, made possible by a virus mutation, would represent a dangerous development in the virus's evolution. Bird flu has been confirmed to have infected only about 200 humans on three continents, but more than half of these cases have been fatal.

Our current method of vaccine production is severely outdated. Since the 1950s, we have been injecting flu virus into hens' eggs to incubate the virus and, months later, extract usable vaccine. Vaccines require far too long to produce – up to nine months. This leaves us vulnerable to virus mutations that render stockpiles useless. Further, avian influenza could devastate the very species that provides the incubators necessary for the whole process – chickens.

Once a transmissible pandemic flu strain emerges, months of lag time will pass before a single dose of vaccine is available. If and when researchers are successful in developing a vaccine, we still must overcome a second barrier – “surge capacity.” Will we be able to mass-produce a quantity of vaccines capable of inoculating our country, and to protect ourselves by sending vaccines abroad?

I applaud the effort of the HHS Pandemic Influenza Plan, released in November 2005, to coordinate a strategic plan for responding to pandemic influenza. However, focusing on the stockpiling and distribution of an as-yet nonexistent vaccine glosses over the need to radically improve our method of developing and manufacturing these biologics quickly and reliably.

The Administration must cultivate advanced technologies, such as novel adjuvants (antibody stimulants) and vaccines based on recombinant production. Fronting production costs that are higher for vaccines than for pharmaceutical products, and providing more grants for promising research through the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation would help. Potential influenza vaccines should be placed at the front of the line for FDA approval, which would expedite the process while maintaining safety and effectiveness safeguards.

Congress will soon appropriate \$2.3 billion in supplemental funds for pandemic influenza preparedness activities in your department. I urge you and your colleagues in the Administration to invest aggressively to foster the development of novel and innovative protections from pandemic influenza.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rush Holt". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

RUSH HOLT  
Member of Congress

RH/md