

Experts moot 'One Health' concept to fight pandemics

Radhakrishnan Kuttoor

Hint at chances of bird flu virus finding new homes in pigs, poultry in Kottayam



Ducks that died of avian influenza being heaped in an open field for burning in the upper Kuttanad area of Peringara a week ago.— Photo: Leju Kamal

An urgent policy decision must be taken by the State government focussing on the 'One Health' concept to fight pandemics like avian influenza, M. Radhakrishna Pillai, Director of the Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Biotechnology, has said.

Dr. Pillai was delivering the sixth Professor K.V. George commemoration talk, organised by the Department of Botany, at the St Thomas College, Kozhencherry, on Saturday.

As per the 'One Health' concept, the health of humans is intimately connected to the health of animals and the environment.

RNA virus

According to him, the recent avian influenza outbreak in ducks in the Kuttanad region and the pathogen H5N1 virus is an RNA virus with segmented genome.

The genetic make-up of the virus changes frequently, modifies or joins with other genomes, making its control very difficult, he says.

He says a single effective vaccine could not be developed, as the virus keeps on changing its genetic structure. In the US, new vaccines are developed within six months with exhaustive research inputs while such conditions are not available in India. Dr Pillai says the diseased ducks, chickens, etc., may spread the virus to other domestic animals including pigs.

There is every probability of the virus finding new homes in pigs, poultry, etc. in the nearby districts, especially in Kottayam, he says.

"The much publicised 'Kerala Model' is losing its sheen over the years. Life style-related diseases are permeating the age barrier. The spiralling cost of essential drugs has already spread a pall of gloom over common man's life," Dr Pillai says.

It is high time to discontinue with the system of treating the symptoms and launch a committed effort to address the real problem, he says.

In most epidemic or pandemic scenarios, animals act as sentinels and as an early warning system to the onslaught of diseases.

Avian Influenza, rabies, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (Mad-Cow Disease), etc., are of serious health concern globally.

Coordination

Close coordination between Animal Husbandry Department, Health Department, scientists, and researchers from other related streams is essential to combat this dangerous epidemic threat, he says.

Roys Mallsserry, college principal, presided over the function. Annie J. Mathew, head of the department of Botany; N.P. Philip, Mammen George, Thomas John, Elizabeth Thomas, Thomas P. Thomas, and Leena Abraham, academics, also addressed the seminar.