

Swine flu battle moves to cyberspace

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THE HAGUE — The clock is ticking, people are dying and a flu virus is sweeping the globe -- that is the scenario of a new computer game designed to make people think about how to respond to the swine flu pandemic.

In "The Great Flu", players must choose whether or not to stockpile anti-viral drugs and deploy research teams to new areas of outbreak as the number of infections and deaths rises and more countries are affected.

Players face tough choices with limited funds -- and taking decisions such as closing major airports do not come cheap. And just to concentrate minds, a map of the world shows the spread of the virus.

"If the money is well invested, the pandemic can be stopped," said Albert Osterhaus, head of virology at Rotterdam's Erasmus Medical Centre, who is credited as the game's scientific editor.

"The game is very realistic and has an educational value," he told AFP. "It informs people how the virus spreads, what the flu is and on the ways to fight the pandemic."

The game, which was dreamed up before the current outbreak seized the headlines, was originally designed for Dutch teenagers, said Michael Bas, who helped design it and is the head of Ranj Serious Games, which markets it.

Put online at the beginning of 2009, www.thegreatflu.com was attracting more than 1,000 visitors a day, with peaks of up to 40,000, he said.

Deborah MacKenzie, a consultant, writing on the New Scientist website, said she found that the game was flawed because it was unclear what effect the action that players took had on the virus.

"But if the current swine flu pandemic gets bad and schools close in the fall, there are going to be a lot of teenagers sitting at home with not much to do, and with luck this could breed up a generation of officials that does understand," she added.

The current outbreak of swine flu, or the A(H1N1) virus, has killed nearly 1,800 people worldwide and infected more than 180,000, but that figure understates the full number since individual cases are no longer reported.

The World Health Organisation, which has declared the virus a pandemic, said this week infections were starting to decline in the southern hemisphere but picking up in several Asian countries.

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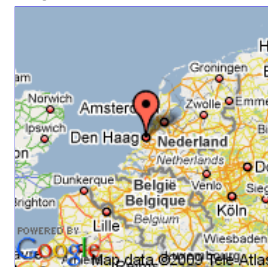
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