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For Immediate Release

Emerging Virus Infections in a Changing World

In the past century, outbreaks of diseases like influenza and AIDS cost the lives of tens of millions of people. Given the current threat of an avian flu pandemic there has been increased discussion of the ethical issues pertaining to the control of infectious disease. Therefore, the Irish Council for Bioethics will dedicate its 3rd public lecture to a discussion of this topic. Professor Albert Osterhaus will present the lecture on 2nd November from 7pm-9pm in the Brookfield Health and Sciences Complex, UCC, Cork.

Infectious disease is caused by a biological agent such as a virus, bacterium or parasite, which can be transmitted from person to person or from organism to organism (e.g. from animals to humans). Infectious diseases cover a panoply ranging from MRSA to HIV to avian flu.

As the world learned from the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak, which leapt across the Pacific Ocean on an aeroplane, major changes in modern society create new opportunities for virus infections to emerge and prosper. The ease of worldwide travel and trade creates new chances for viruses to cross the species barriers (e.g. the Aids virus spreading from monkeys to humans). Similarly the increase in populations and the occurrence of people living in close proximity to one-another is a cause for concern.

In his lecture, Professor Osterhaus, will give an overview of his research into producing a vaccine against avian flu and will talk about how the spread of avian flu will influence health policy decisions such as:

- How far healthcare workers' duties should extend in a life threatening pandemic situation, and what they are due in return for their efforts
- The extent to which measures taken to protect public health should override individual freedoms (e.g., quarantine and travel restrictions)?
- How scarce resources will be distributed among the public i.e. who will be prioritised, and why.
- How vaccines should be developed and whether pharmaceutical companies should be allowed to patent their discoveries potentially making medicines more expensive
- How international stakeholders should collaborate in order to establish early warning systems and effective preparedness plans.

Speaking on behalf of the Irish Council for Bioethics Dr Siobhán O'Sullivan (Scientific Director) said: "The 2003 global outbreak of SARS and the regular outbreak of MRSA in Irish hospitals provide abrupt reminders that infectious diseases pose a threat to human health. Therefore we are delighted to have Prof. Osterhaus address the ethical questions relating to this important issue."

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