

INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

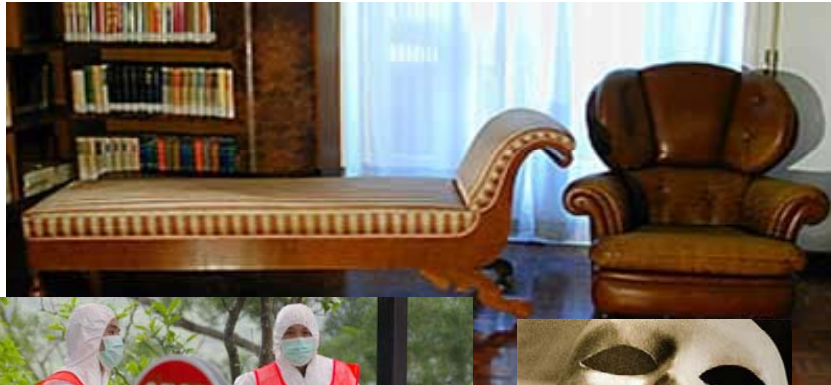
PREPARDNESS AND CONTROL

Beijing 1-2 August 2006



**THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE: PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASPECTS OF THE FEAR OF PANDEMICS**

Centre for Science, Society and Citizenship



I'm a psychoanalyst and my background is in Psychiatry and Philosophy.

I currently run the Centre for Science, Society and Citizenship, in Rome, Italy.

I have been the coordinator of a high level meeting convened by the European Commission on GLOBALISATION AND NEW EPIDEMICS: ETHICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS



Centre for Science, Society and Citizenship

GLOBALISATION AND NEW EPIDEMICS

Brussels 22-24 May 2006

BIG
Bioethical Implications of Globalisation



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BIG Project

➡ December 2002 – Kick off Meeting of the Project

➡ 2003 – Three International Conferences

January 2003 – Rome - Mobility

June 2003 – Manchester – Technology

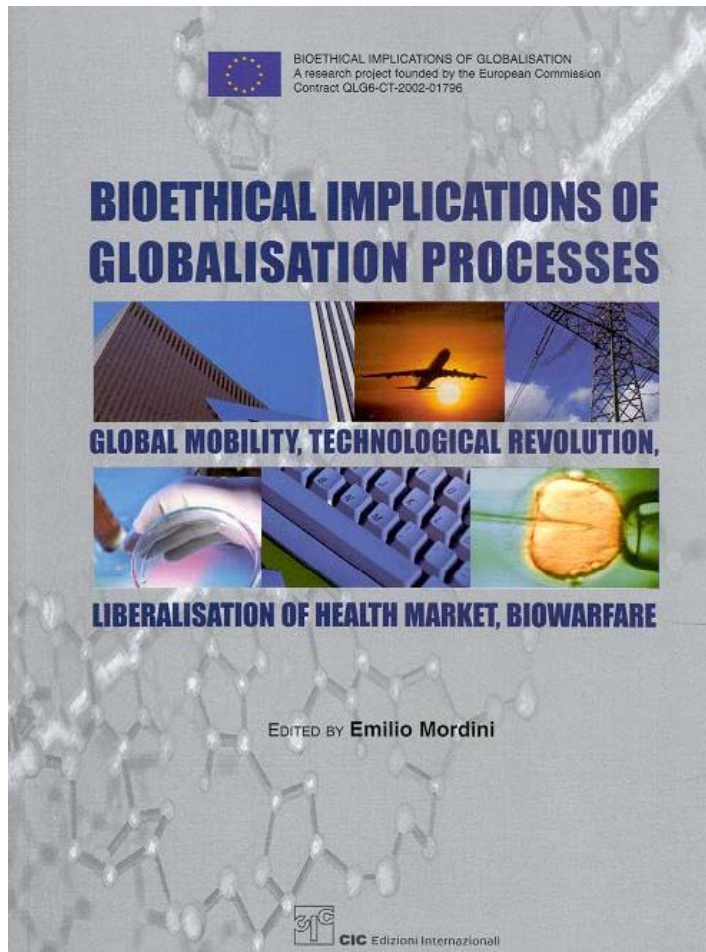
November 2003 – Washington DC – Liberalisation of Trade and Services

➡ 2004 – High Level Seminar (Brussels)
ELSI of Research on Biological Weapons and Prevention of Bioterrorism

➡ 2005 DELPHI Exercise (approx 600 experts from all over the world)

➡ 2006 - International Workshop on Globalisation and Epidemics

Conferences



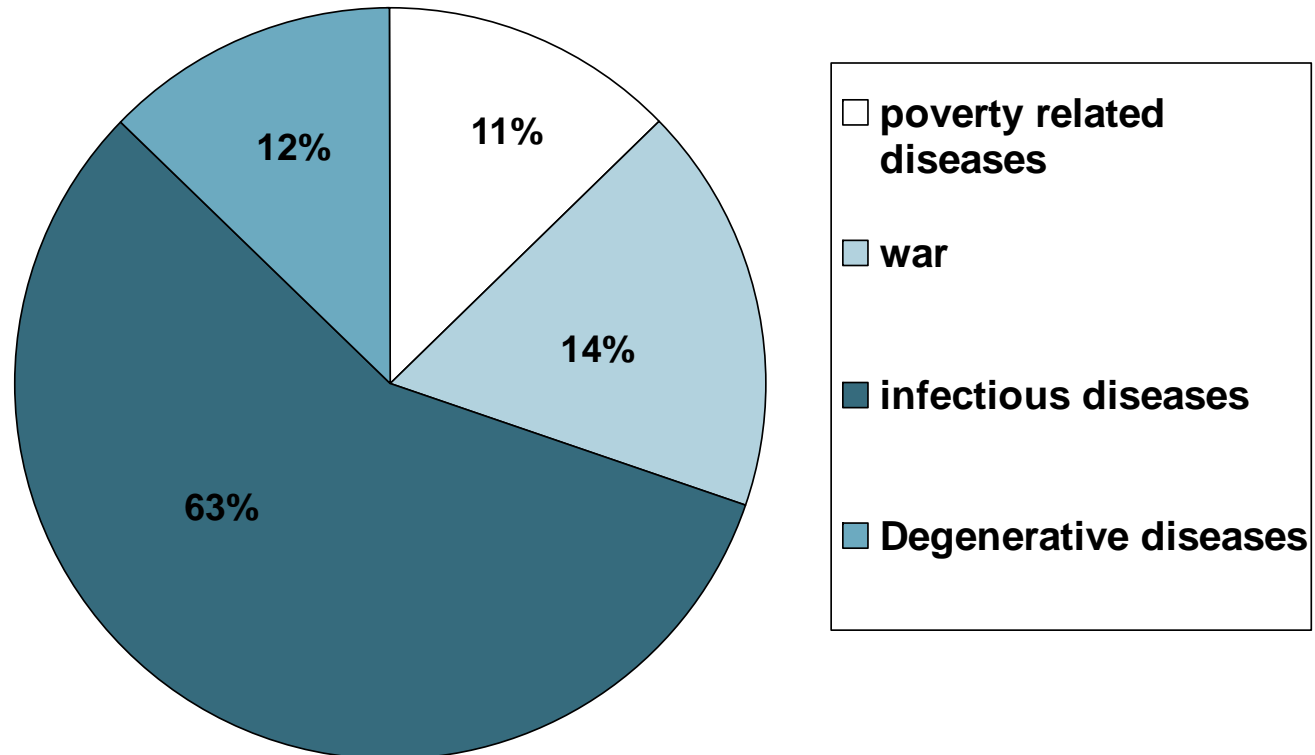
96 experts involved

14 different disciplines

16 different countries

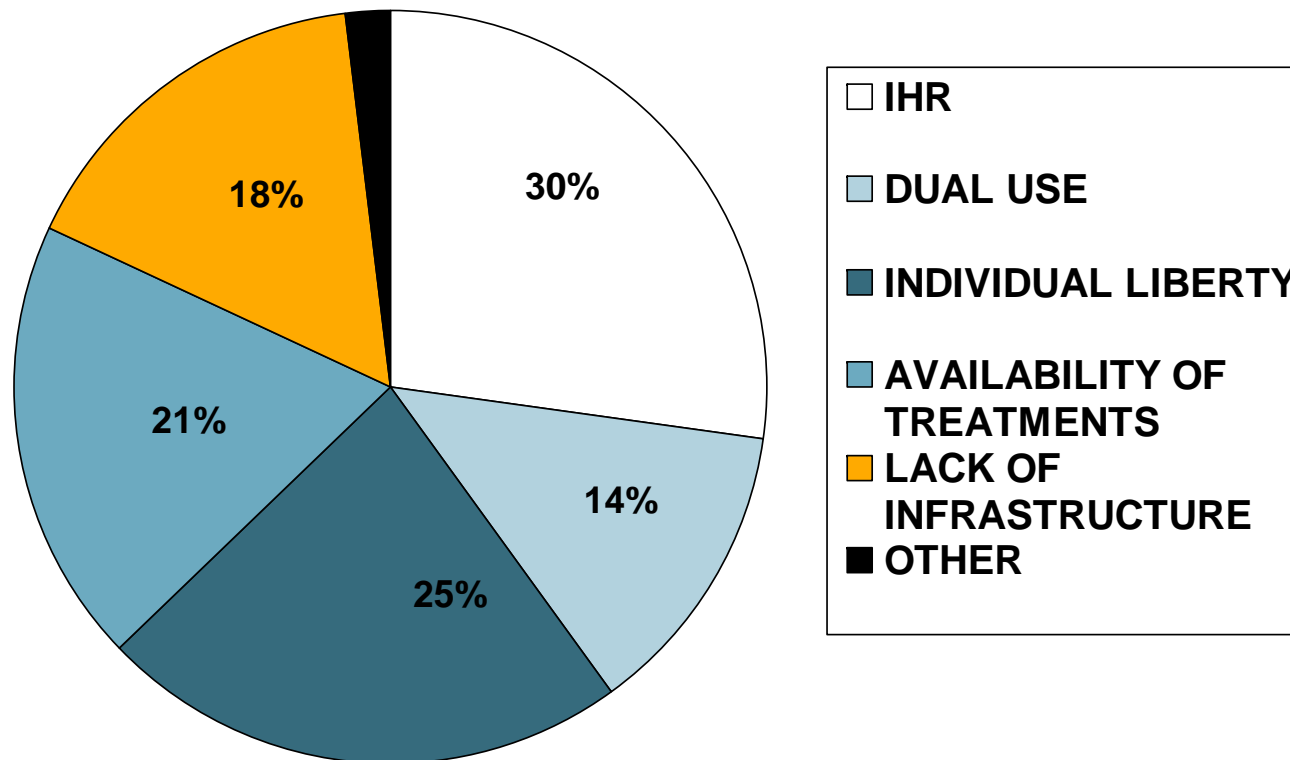
DELPHI QUESTIONNAIRE

Future Global Health Issues

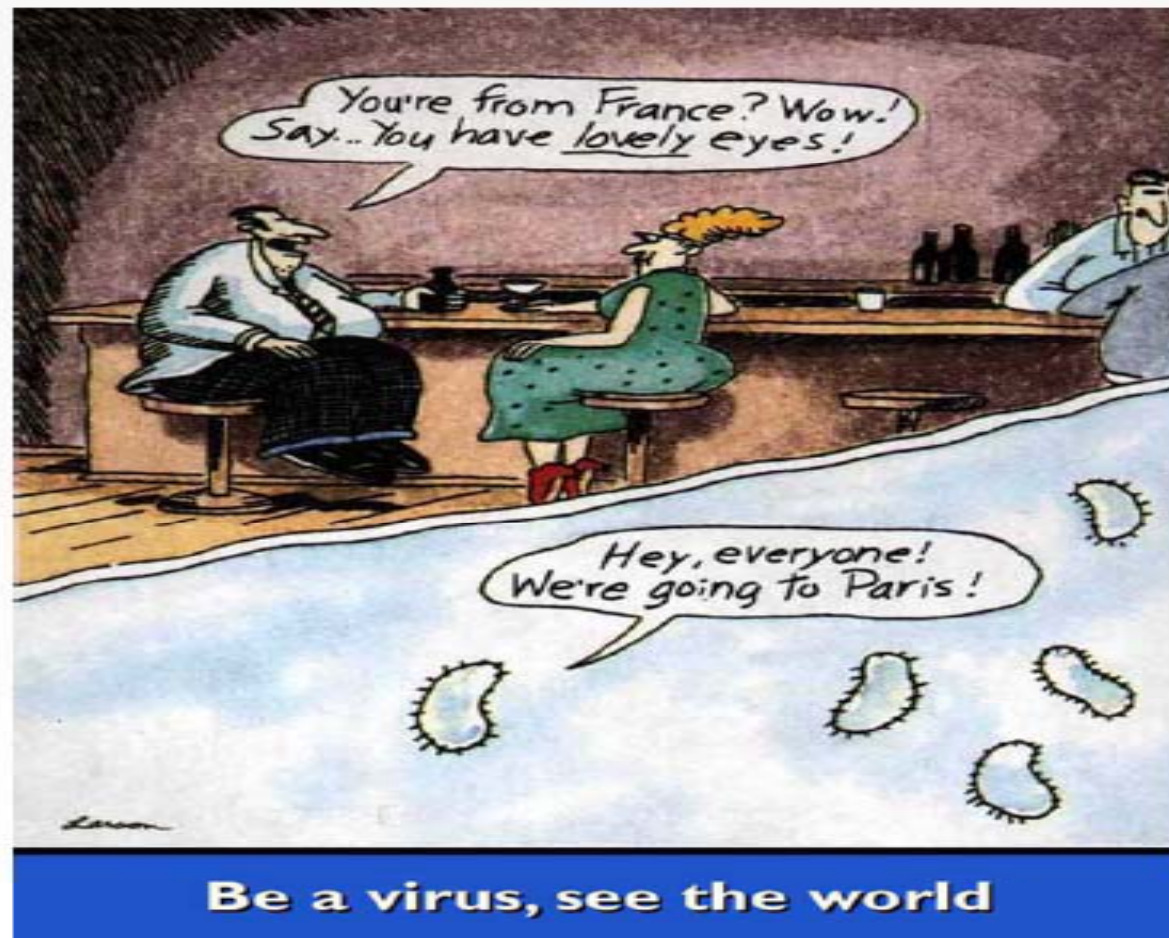


DELPHI QUESTIONNAIRE

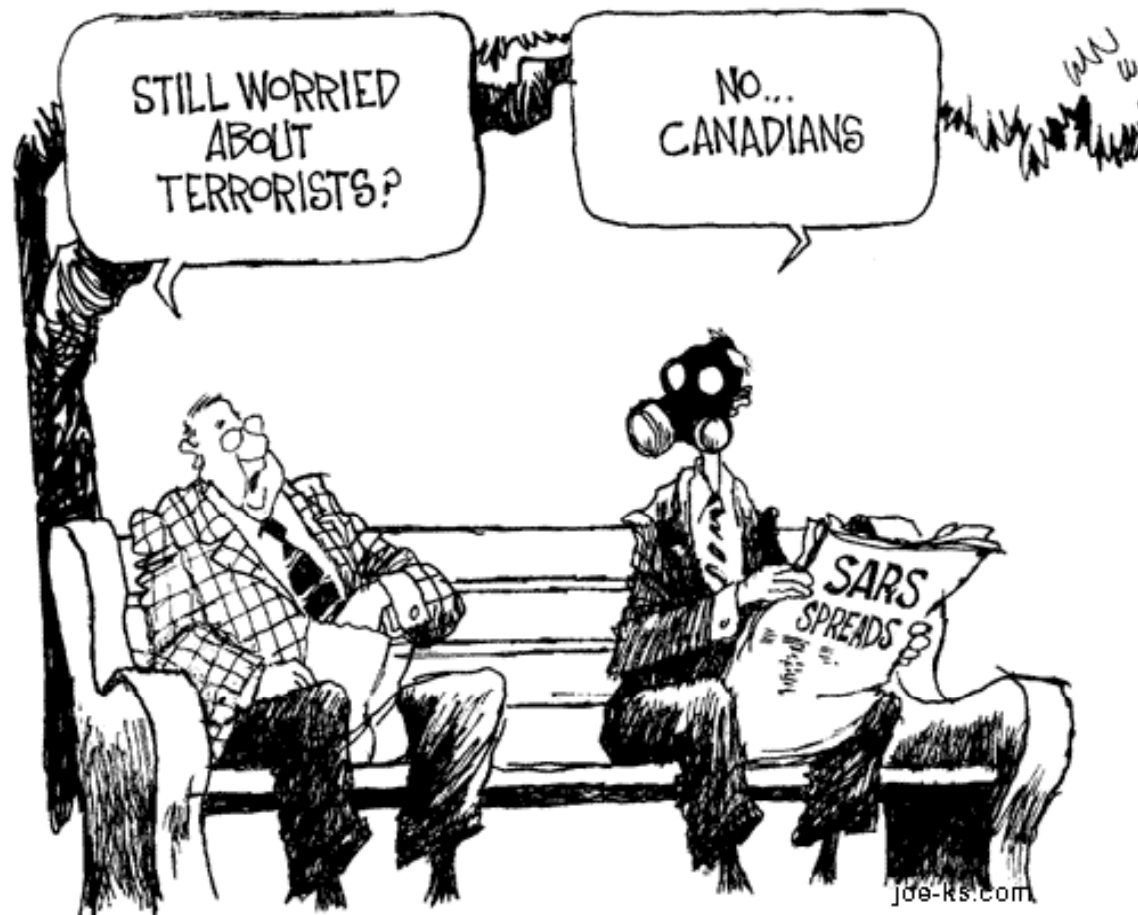
Ethical and Policy Issues related to new epidemics



Infectious diseases ARE globalisation-bound



... but why people fear that infectious diseases are likely to be the next catastrophic event?



An aspect of current fear of epidemics is that it is hard to distinguish a natural disease outbreak from an intentionally caused biological threat.

And actually many urban myths have been circulated about the artificial origins of AIDS, SARS, Ebola, Avian Flu, etc.

The fear of new epidemics is part of a wider “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” syndrome according to which people think that soon or later scientists are losing control of their creatures



Why people fear that scientists may lose control of their science?

Because it has already happened;
Because people don't trust any longer in experts' integrity;
But even more deeply because...

People feel that experts are no longer "those who know why" but they are "those who know how"



..and if you know “how” but you don’t know “why”,
you may become very dangerous!

Experts have only technical information but they cannot explain why something is going to happen.

There is a crucial difference between the notion of “cause” and that of “mediating mechanism”. Usually experts know something about the “mechanism”, but they ignore the “reason”. You can perfectly know how bombs explode but this doesn’t tell you anything about why a suicide bomber explode.



It is the feeling of unpredictability, of absurdity, of non-sense, which provokes panic.

This holds true at personal, psychological, level and at societal level.

Risk management is basically a way to deal with future events by trying to give them a sense.



Risk management assumes that the world is a (rather) logic place where facts happen according to certain laws and at a certain degree they can be predicted without asking a fortune teller.





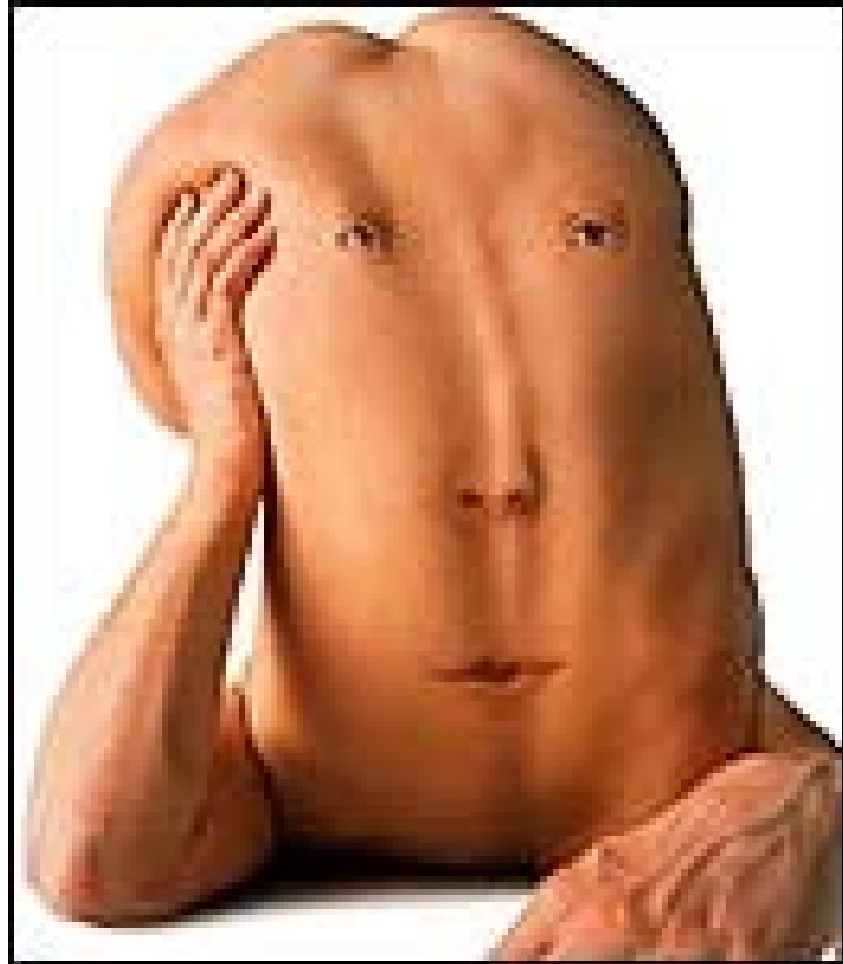
Recent crises seem to differ fundamentally from this model. They all imply some degree of absurdity, they are beyond any “normal” logic.

This is true for terrorism and for pandemics: they both don't follow easy, predictable laws. This is what makes them so threatening, though their dimension in term of death will probably be inferior to death for car accident or for smoking.

In such cases the acquisition of a specific, rigid technical arsenal to respond to an emergency is no longer adequate.

Before unpredictable events, standard risk management is ineffective.

If an event is unpredictable, people don't want to be illuded they chiefly need to be helped to conceptualise the event.



SOME GENERAL RULES

- Accept and involve the public as a partner
- Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts
- Listen to the public's specific concerns
- Be honest, frank, and open
- Work with other credible sources
- Meet the needs of the media
- Speak clearly and with compassion

Identify and respond to the needs of different audiences

Recognize that people's values and feelings are a legitimate aspect of health issues

(Covello and Allen 1988)

"As we know there are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know."

Donald Rumsfeld, the United States defence secretary



Leaders are those who are able to make thinkable the unthinkable and then fill the gap between chaos and order.

Leaders think what is unthinkable, they must become the collective mind who thinks what is unthinkable for all other people.

This skill is particularly necessary to counteract the inability to think, perhaps the most seriously pathological reaction to the new forms of crisis (“In a crisis, you don’t have time to think”).





Experts are those who know “how”

Leaders are those who know “why” or – if it is not possible to know “why” – they are those who allow (both in a social and psychological sense) people to ask themselves “why?”.

"I will read, and you shall listen; - and so we will pass away this terrible night together."

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER
by Edgar Allan Poe, 1839

Thank you for your attention!

