

The Editor, The Times  
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**Avian 'Flu**

Sir – Quite understandably our Government continues to draw up contingency plans for the day it has to deal with the H5N1 bird flu within these shores.

As part of the planning it has agreed with the National Farmers' Union to build a database of all commercial poultry units, their location and size. But for reasons of logistics and bureaucracy it is not going to require the estimated half a million domestic keepers of poultry in this country to register their birds.

In the “panic pandemic” currently surrounding bird ‘flu in the UK, so well described in your recent Leader article, a disproportionate focus of Government planning has fallen on commercial poultry farms in general and on outdoor, free-range and organic poultry farms in particular. But, not since the Second World War has so much poultry been kept on UK domestic premises. Worryingly, it is these hobby and domestic poultry keepers who most closely mimic the scenario in S E Asia where some 67 human deaths have been recorded in people living amongst, and working alongside, poultry.

If outdoor and extensively reared birds are a real route to a pandemic then the same argument must apply to hobby and domestic birds. The pandemic isn't here yet but in the meantime let us stop kidding ourselves that such incomplete databases are going to help and that intensive, indoor poultry production offers any shelter from the bird ‘flu threat.

Yours

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