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Preventing panic attacks

WITH the World Health Organisation raising the alarm to the second highest level, Malaysia cannot help but take the threat from swine flu, influenza A, or whatever name the deadly virus is called, "seriously". Of course, policy-makers like the health minister cannot afford not to act. With the rise in the flu count in 11 countries, it would appear that the virulent virus has spread more rapidly than SARS or bird flu did to warrant the second elevation in the alert level in two days. But as serious as the situation may be, it should not define our public health priorities. Certainly not when the country is still swine-flu free but remains afflicted with dengue, as the more than 16,000 cases and 41 deaths this year attest. In declaring that the "dengue situation is worse than swine flu," Health Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai, has managed to put the public health risks in the proper perspective. Indeed, in this country, children have more to fear from an outbreak of hand, foot and mouth disease, the sexually-active from HIV infections, and the middle-aged from clogged arteries, than contact with feverish people with sneezing fits.

Moreover, while a flu pandemic may be imminent, it may also fizzle out, as viruses like this have been known to do. As it is, no one really knows what it is, where and how it started, where it may strike next, or how severe the pandemic may be when it does break out. In any event, the current number of confirmed cases (250 according to WHO) and deaths (12 in Mexico and one in the US) are both too small to sustain apocalyptic predictions. There is no reason to assume the worst, except for the purposes of pandemic planning, which, like all the best disaster management blueprints, must anticipate the worst and prepare for it. In any case, we have the advantage of advance warning, surveillance systems, anti-viral treatments, and are better prepared, thanks to the wake-up calls from SARS and bird flu. Even if the worst happens, like it did when the Spanish Flu killed more than 50 million, and 30 per cent of the population fall ill, many can recover and only one per cent will not live to tell the tale.

This is why, while it is understandable that anxiety levels have risen, and we cannot dismiss the possibility of a pandemic, we have to inoculate ourselves against panic attacks — and cross our fingers and hope for the best.