

Why Giant Gerbils are the next big headache for the BC Manager

In the 21st Century the business continuity manager has become familiar with that chat with the senior executive that starts out with, “what do you think we should be doing about...?” and concludes with whatever the latest Major Threat To You/Business/The World has been in his morning newspaper. So it was following 9/11, the Tsunami and pandemic flu.

“So Jim” begins the VP with responsibility for monitoring the newspapers, “... if all of our staff were to be killed in a major terror attack/unexpected wave/outbreak of flu (delete as applicable), what would be our plan?” Resisting the temptation to say “why would I care?” or “what makes you think we’ll be the survivors?” in order to preserve his job for a little longer, Jim responds that “he’ll look into it.”

Well, if this rather tongue in cheek rendition of reality rings any bells with you, then read on. This is your chance to take the initiative.

So there are these Giant Gerbils in Kazakhstan. Now I know that this may sound unlikely, but really there are. What is more, they carry the plague in several unpleasant formats – pneumonic, septicaemic and bubonic. Death rates from these are around 60% for bubonic and around 100% for the other two, if left untreated. The incubation period is usually 1 or 2 days and the prognosis is poor if treatment is not started within 18 hours. As with many diseases its initial presentation is similar to pneumonia but painful swellings then emerge to confirm the diagnosis. What is interesting is that recent research has revealed that the disease is endemic in rodents and is transmitted through the population such that it rises in infection rates and then falls away again. However, what seems to happen from time to time is that the disease reaches some threshold where suddenly there is a considerable increase in the spread through the population. It is thought that this may have coincided with the movement of Genghis Khan’s army leading to the spread of the infection into medieval Europe.

Whilst plague seems like a throwback to historic times, in fact there are still occasional outbreaks in rodents in various parts of the world, including Asia but also nearer populated areas such as California. Indeed, from time to time this results in human cases and even fatalities. Consequently there are monitoring programmes which endeavour to provide early warning of any developments in the rodent population and to advise people to take suitable precautions, for instance when intending to picnic in areas of known infection. Where infection is identified, measures are taken against the rodents, such as culling or spraying with insecticide to deal with the fleas which are the vectors for the disease (see picture).

Increasing global trade and travel is increasing the risk of transmission of these diseases either through the importation of infected fleas on skins or animals, or directly on travellers in these areas. Indeed many of the same arguments as are pertinent to pandemic flu apply here, with the possibility of the sudden appearance of the disease in an unexpected area of the world where this then contributes to a slow diagnosis allowing the plague to gain a foothold. Whilst normal hygiene and prompt treatment from antibiotics should prevent the disease repeating the impact experienced across Medieval Europe, like all diseases it may subtly alter to develop drug resistance which when coupled to passing the critical threshold of infection in the Gerbil population would lead to a sudden explosion of a powerful new disease. One can imagine that this may have a considerable impact in rural China, India, Pakistan and quickly spread to centres of commerce in these countries.

One of the greatest concerns in Western Europe might arise not from the disease itself, but from the fear of the disease. The “Black Death” devastated the population of Europe to the point where whole villages disappeared, farm animals wandered the countryside untended and the population lived in perpetual fear of the return of this mysterious disease for several hundred years. The echoes of this could quickly be fanned by media coverage – remember the TV documentaries on the 1918 flu outbreak – and lead to paralysis of economic life and certainly the suspension of animal movements across borders.

Whilst it is by no means a foregone conclusion that the Kazakhstan Giant Gerbils will be the source of the development of the plague, they are the most likely candidates. Ground squirrels in the US are closely monitored and the US has the means to take early pre-emptive action and to treat human victims. However, in central Asia, conflict and economic breakdown may lead to the spread of disease past a critical threshold so that it cannot be contained.

So, now you can get ahead of the game. Go tell your boss that you’re updating the pandemic plan to take account of the unique challenges posed by Giant Gerbils from Kazakhstan and the inevitable spread of plague at some time in the future. If he queries this, you can quote recent research to support your assertion and a BBC programme on this very subject. Alternatively, you might just decide to concentrate on the 99% of events that actually impact organizations of all sorts every year; top of the list being IT failure reported by 43% of organizations as causing significant disruption in the previous year. But that is a risk based decision and is entirely up to you.

Picture 1: Spraying Gerbil burrows in Kazakhstan

