OPINION

OUR VIEWS

Bird flu death puts La. health officials' vaccine perfidy in stark relief

We don't have answers for all the deadly infectious diseases in the world, a fact made painfully clear Monday as Louisiana reported the nation's first human death from H5N1, a variation of bird flu. The 65-year-old patient contracted the virus from a backyard flock of wild birds, according to the state Department of Health.

While there are no other known cases in Louisiana, 66 people across the United States have contracted avian influenza since 2024. In the meantime, scientists have been rushing to develop new vaccines, with the U.S. giving biotech company Moderna millions to develop an experimental vaccine using mRNA.

Many will recall that the mRNA technology was used to develop the vaccine against COVID-19. While vaccines saved millions of lives during the pandemic, they have bafflingly become the source of controversy as some seek to downplay their effectiveness and overstate their risks.

It is one thing when fringe conspiracy theorists on the far right or pseudoscience wellness gurus on the far left do this. But we expect officials who are tasked with protecting public health to deal in reality. Unfortunately for Louisianans, recent revelations indicate that's not what is happening.

Shortly before the new year, Louisiana Department of Health spokesperson Emma Herrock said in a statement that the department was shifting away from "paternalistic guidance" on vaccines. If you, like us, were scratching your head about what that means, reporting from New Orleans public radio station WWNO cited Department of Health employees who said they were told of the new policy in the fall and that it prohibits them from holding vaccine events and from sending out news releases or posting on social media encouraging the public to get vaccinated against a range of diseases that include flu and mpox, not just COVID. Employees are not even allowed to post information about the availability of vaccines in health department clinics around the state.

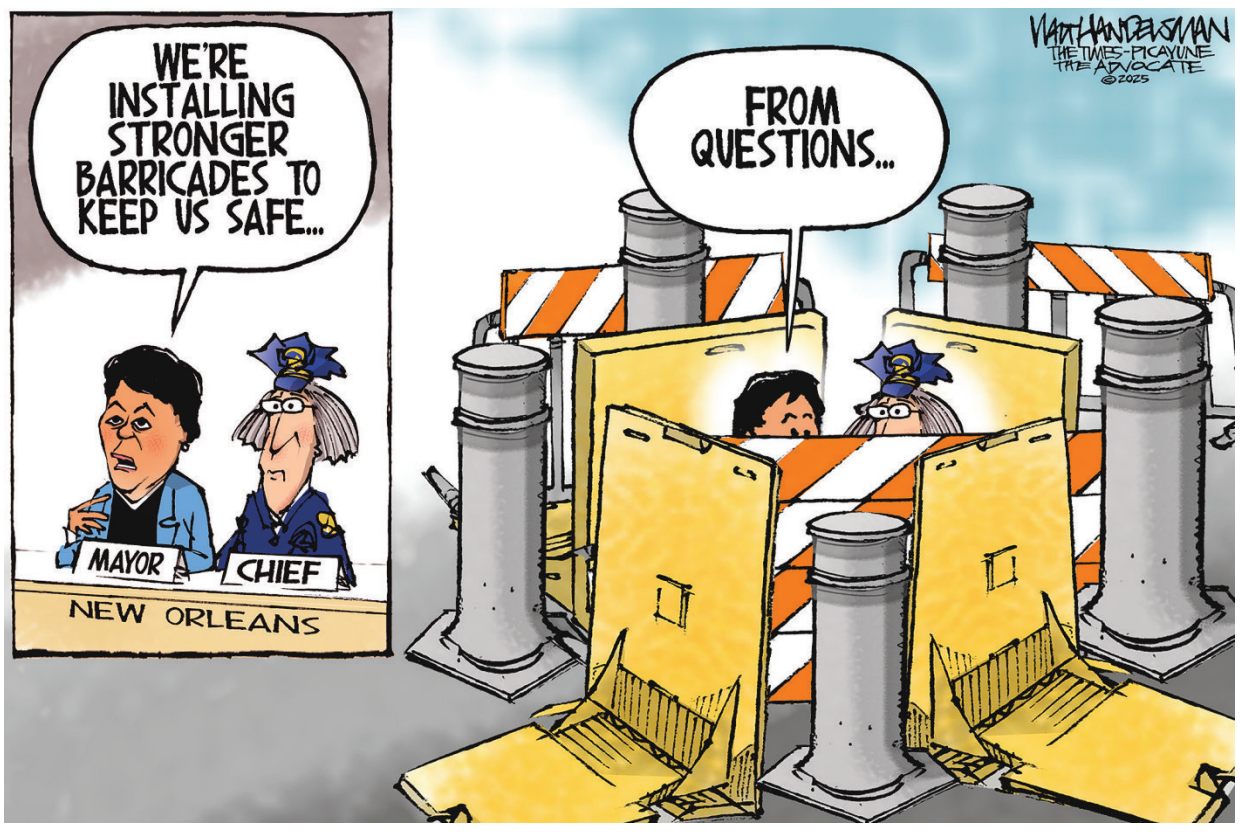
Far from "paternalistic guidance," these measures seem to us exactly what a health department exists to do. The department says the new policy won't apply to childhood immunizations, which is good news. Yet it argues that it is taking a "more informative approach aimed at enabling individuals, in consultation with their doctor, to make better decisions for themselves." At a time when the state has no qualms about restricting pregnant women's access to care, it's utterly laughable that officials have suddenly prioritized the doctor-patient relationship in this arena.

The four health department employees who were quoted in the WWNO report requested anonymity because they feared retaliation. We are grateful they had the courage to speak out.

We don't expect our public health officials to have all the answers. But when they do have information that can save lives, it's sheer dereliction of duty to hide it. Vaccines work, and Louisiana officials need to stop the pandering and say so.

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YOUR VIEWS

N.O. should be preparing for Super Bowl every day

In 30 days, New Orleans will once again be on the world stage as the host city for the NFL Super Bowl, which is projected to generate half a billion dollars in economic impact.

When they arrive, Super Bowl visitors will encounter cleaner streets, upgraded infrastructure, enhanced public safety and unparalleled New Orleans hospitality.

At this very moment, city, state and federal resources are at work to make one of the biggest sporting events in the world a success. As the state senator for downtown New Orleans, I strongly support this coordination and the resources needed to host this important event.

However, let us not miss the opportunity to experience how well things can function when leaders across the board decide to work together toward one shared cause. Put more simply, we should act as though New Orleans was hosting a Super Bowl every year.

Leaders in Baton Rouge should collaborate more regularly with Louisiana's most significant city. New Orleans elected officials, business and civic leaders should find more opportunities to work together to make our city safer and stronger, while embracing culture, cooperation and competency as part of an everyday commitment to our people. Leaders should put aside differences to prioritize public safety, infrastructure and equitable economic development.

Despite all of the constant fighting that seems to dominate our politics, and cries about a lack of resources to meet needs, our efforts around the Super Bowl have shown that we have the resources and capacity to accomplish anything in New Orleans when we have the collective will.

Our city is a beautiful mix of culture and community. But it is also our responsibility to ensure it is safe, clean and functional. Let's use the momentum of the Super Bowl to not just meet, but exceed, the expectations of our citizens. Let's make this commitment to ongoing improvement and collaboration a part of our everyday life in the city we all love.

SEN. ROYCE DUPLESSIS
state senator, District 5

Former superintendent's payout demands further scrutiny

Surely Joe Public is appalled by the former New Orleans schools superintendent getting a $335,000 settlement? Does this smell bad to you? Initially, there was a revelation of an accounting error and a $36 million shortfall in the budget. The superintendent abruptly resigned, and now we find out she got a golden parachute.

Aren't these public funds? It would seem criminal for public funds to be given out in this manner unless required contractually. The article implies this was a mutually agreeable separation. It would seem in that case, she should be paid through her last day on the job with any additional PTO that she has, and all should be good.

If we are buying someone's silence, surely the inspector general should inquire about this, and the public should know what is going on behind closed doors. Is this how the folks on this board spend their money? I guess if the guy who cuts their grass quits at the end of the year, they will just pay him for next year because he was a nice guy.

They should spend public funds like it was their own. As much as the state continues to tax Joe Public to fund teachers, here we are giving someone $335,000. That could have been around another $2,200 to 150 teachers. With limited funds and resources, we all need to learn to do more with less. We should trim the fat, reduce waste and root out corruption.

Surely someone has an idea of how much of the state budget is wasted. How much is that? Why don't we try to fix that before taxing Joe Public again.

RICARDO FERNANDEZ
Metairie

Grain terminal has no business near residential neighborhoods

I appreciate your article calling attention to our struggle by residents near Alabo Street Wharf to "Stop the Train, and Stop the Grain," and hope you will continue to expose the ongoing saga.

I live behind the Alabo Port. The port's freight train will go down the middle of Alabo Street, where there are homes 75 feet or less away. People will be blocked from access to their driveways. Imagine the damage to nearby homes from the vibrations. No one has offered any compensation or buyout or even acknowledges that people live on Alabo Street. Apparently, there will be two trains daily. I am supposing that could mean four, since the trains come in empty and go out full. We have no guarantee of how many trains there will be in the future or how long they will be.

A five-block by seven-block area that will be boxed in by the trains. We have the Mississippi River on one side, the National Guard Armory on another side. Now the train would block Alabo and St. Claude. This is like the box in Uptown during Mardi Gras parades. How does anyone think this is acceptable? They know it is wrong, and that is why no one informed the residents.

This debacle is an insult to people who will be affected by this project and who were not consulted or given any say. Holy Cross has a high percentage of African Americans. People have owned their homes and built the community for generations. Will this project go down in history as another human rights violation like I-10 going down Claiborne or the displacement of Fazendeville to recreate the Chalmette Battlefield? Both were given apologies 50 years later. Will Holy Cross have to wait 50 years for an apology?

TAMALYN HARRIS
New Orleans

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