

Nobel laureate plays down flu pandemic scaremongering

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A Nobel prize-winning scientist Tuesday played down "shock-horror scenarios" that a new virus strain will emerge with the potential to kill millions of people.

Peter Doherty, who jointly won the [Nobel prize](#) in 1996 for his work on how the immune system combats virus-infected cells, said the worst-case scenario was a [new virus](#) with a high mortality rate that was also highly infectious.

The Australian said the world experienced such a pandemic in 1918, when an influenza variant killed an estimated 50 million people, more than twice the number who died in World War I.

Doherty said it was possible such an outbreak could occur again but it was unlikely to have such devastating consequences.

"A lot of the (1918) deaths were undoubtedly due to secondary bacterial infection and, of course, we have antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infection now," he said at a lecture at Otago University's Wellington campus.

"In the pandemic world we all look to these shock-horror scenarios—it makes good television, there's a lot of books about these terrible infections that are going to kill us all off.

"It makes a good book, it makes it terribly scary (but) I actually think that we'll do a lot better than that with most pandemics."

Doherty said analysis of the [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome](#) (SARS) virus, a form of influenza which killed about 800 people, took three months when it emerged a decade ago.

The University of Melbourne-based scientist said similar work would now take just days.

"We're doing extremely well with virus diagnosis,

[rapid detection](#) and all sorts of things like that, much better than in the past, so I don't think a pandemic is going to kill us all off," he said.

Doherty said the H1N1 "[swine flu](#)" which sickened millions around the world in 2009 was an example of an highly infectious strain with a relatively low mortality rate, with some 18,500 deaths reported to the [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO).

Another strain, H7N9, emerged in China in March and has a high mortality rate of 36 deaths from 130 cases, according to official data. But there is no evidence it can be transmitted from human to human.

The WHO has also since last September confirmed 40 cases of a coronavirus closely related to SARS. It has caused 20 deaths, mostly in Saudi Arabia.

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