Division of Infectious Diseases
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Dear Executive Policy Committee

Re: Proposed Responsible Pet Ownership By-law Amendment
Backyard Chickens in Winnipeg

I am a **Canadian Infectious Diseases Specialist** and Clinical Assistant Professor of Medicine, currently based in Vancouver, at Vancouver General Hospital and the University of British Columbia.

I am concerned about the risk of future outbreaks and pandemics. In 2003, I worked in Toronto during the SARS outbreak; in 2009, I worked in Newfoundland during the H1N1 "swine flu" pandemic; in 2014, I worked in Guinea and Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak; and over these past 2 years I have worked on the COVID ward at Vancouver General Hospital.

This COVID-19 pandemic, and the previous the previous H1N1 swine influenza pandemic in 2009 have demonstrated that our interactions with animals can have massive health, economic, and social impacts globally.

It is **well established** that **backyard chickens present an important interface** where pathogens, especially influenza, can **spill over** into chickens from wild birds, or vice versa, and even into people.

This is a serious risk that would be increased by introducing more chickens into the backyards of people living in an urban environment. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (**FAO**) has identified “smallholder livestock systems” as **disproportionately large facilitators of infectious disease spread**.

On an individual level, for people owning and interacting with backyard chickens **Salmonella** is a serious risk, especially to very young children or persons with immunocompromise. This risk has been recently highlighted by the **US CDC** following investigation of a nationwide salmonella outbreak linked to backyard chickens that has caused illness in over a thousand people and the death of at least two people this past year.

On a community or population level, the risks associated with **avian influenza** are particularly concerning. The emergence of new strains of avian influenza related to backyard poultry farms can spillover into commercial poultry operations and disrupt international trade and acquire mutations allowing it to be transmitted to people and risk future pandemics.

As the backyard chicken industry is growing, pathogen spillover events between backyard chickens and wild birds and people are becoming more commonly reported.

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Just this month, cases of highly pathogenic avian influenza were detected on commercial and backyard chicken farms in Ontario. The infection likely originated from migrating wild birds. In response, the Toronto Zoo has closed its aviaries to protect its birds from infection. In recent days, suspected cases of the virus have been found in wild birds in Manitoba.

Earlier this year, a 79-year-old man in UK who kept ducks in his backyard and home fell sick with avian influenza H5N1. Fortunately, he recovered and there was no further documented transmission, but with increased interactions, the risks are increased.

There may be personal enjoyment for people from keeping chickens in their backyard as pets of for personal egg production. However, there are serious risks to the broader community and public health.

It is **easier to prevent** the introduction of backyard chicken farms then to start to close them at a later date. It is easier to prevent a pandemic, then to manage a pandemic and attempt to stop it once started.

The recent movie "Don't Look Up" called attention to our downplaying of global warming and climate change. Similarly, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and an increasing number of human cases of illness related to avian influenza globally, the risks of future infectious disease outbreaks and pandemics related to our uses of animals have been seemingly downplayed.

It is well established that backyard chickens constitute a risk for spillover events to commercial poultry, wildlife and people. We should take these risks seriously, prioritize public health and our natural environment and reduce unnecessary risks such as more backyard chicken farms, especially in urban environments.

Alternatives like promoting backyard gardens present much safer and environmentally friendly approaches to connecting with our food and natural world.

It is my strong recommendation, and plea as an infectious diseases specialist, to not pursue pilot projects or approval of additional backyard chicken ownership in the City of Winnipeg.

Sincerely,



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