Reviewer's report

Title: Accuracy of epidemiological inferences based on publicly available information: retrospective comparative analysis of line lists of human cases infected with influenza A(H7N9) in China

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Reviewer: Gerardo Chowell

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In this paper authors carried out various epidemiological inferences on the A/H7N9 avian influenza outbreak in humans in China, including changes in transmissibility and severity, using different line lists of A/H7N9 influenza cases in humans. These line lists were compiled from publicly available information. Authors then compared these epidemiological estimates from line-lists with those derived from official data from the Chinese CDC. Overall this is an important paper as their findings underscore the need to create a reliable online repository of epidemiological data that is updated in real-time for health emergencies like the ongoing A/H7N9 influenza in China and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome in order to carry out quick and reliable epidemiological assessments. The paper is well-written and I have no major comments. However, I think the authors could point out that monitoring the evolving transmissibility of emerging influenza viruses is crucial and requires fairly accurate information about the onset of symptoms of cases in addition to reliable exposure history information. In particular, early assessments of the transmission potential of A/H7N9 influenza in humans were possible using official data from the Chinese CDC (see BMC Med 11:214, 2013). By contrast, a substantial number of cases (e.g., about 20% of cases) were missing symptoms onset information in the Flutrackers line list as of April 25, 2013, which hindered the estimation of reproduction numbers using this publicly available data.

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests