

TESSA MAYES

Swine flu conspiracy theories go viral

Tessa Mayes reports from Mexico on how the government's reaction to the outbreak is seen as evidence of political intrigue.

12 MAY 2009

Walking into a shop in Mexico City to buy a phone card at the tail-end of the national swine-flu shutdown last week, I noticed none of the vendors was wearing a face mask, contrary to government recommendations. I asked the man behind the counter why. He gestured with his hand, suggesting the recommendations were all 'talk, talk, talk'. Now that those who fled Mexico City because of the swine flu outbreak are returning, most masks are off and talk has turned to the causes of the panic. The number of A/H1N1 virus cases may have subsided, but conspiracy theories are proving to be much more infectious.

Some Mexicans are questioning whether the swine flu virus was real or more like the mythical monster Chupacabras, a vampire-like creature that sucks goats' blood. Others are treating the government with suspicion because the virus has turned out to be much less severe than originally thought (1). Yet as Dr Margaret Chan, director general of the World Health Organisation (WHO) explained, 'new diseases are by definition poorly understood' (2). Some confusion about the number of cases was bound to occur. On 29 April, even the WHO considered a pandemic likely by raising the A/H1N1 alert status to Phase 5 ('a strong signal that a pandemic is imminent') (3).

But what the Mexican government is being accused of is knowing about the disease and the future spread of the infection long before scientists did. The common refrain is that the Mexico-wide shutdown was a political conspiracy. Nobody I've talked to has suggested that there were no swine flu deaths or seasonal flu infections, or that it wasn't a serious problem. The charge is it that the over-reaction was caused by a corrupt government wanting to cover up their failings in other areas.

So what's the evidence? The main example cited is that while Mexicans were panicked into staying at home, the government quietly introduced two new laws. The rumour is that one was a law that allows the authorities to check people's internet traffic and emails and the other was a law banning drugs. Another piece of 'evidence' is the fact that US President Obama visited Mexican President Felipe Calderon just before the outbreak occurred. What the two leaders are supposed to have concocted together in secret is a mystery.

'I can't believe the government has introduced all these new laws', says one young Mexican student friend. How did he find out about them? Another friend told him at the university campus. In fact, the Mexican Congress has voted to decriminalise possession for *autoconsumo*, or individual consumption, and to help young drug users (4), but if a person is caught with more than five grams of marijuana they face harsher penalties. The law is not yet official (5).