

'Swine flu claimed quarter of a million lives'

THE A(H1N1) "swine flu" 2009 pandemic probably claimed over a quarter of a million lives — 15 times more than the 18,500 reported, a paper in *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* journal said yesterday.

The elevated toll underlined the need for better planning and vaccine distribution, said a team of epidemiologists and physicians who made a statistical model based on population and infection estimates to present what they believe is a more accurate picture of the pandemic's reach.

"This study is one of the first to provide a global estimate of deaths caused by the 2009 H1N1 virus," lead author Fatimah Dawood of the US government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told AFP in an email exchange.

"Unlike most other mortality estimates for the 2009 pandemic, this study includes

estimated mortality for countries in southeast Asia and Africa where surveillance data on influenza-associated mortality are limited."

Some 18,500 deaths had been reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO) from confirmed laboratory test results, but the international researchers believe this number to be a gross underestimation.

They wrote that "... diagnostic specimens are not always obtained from people who die with influenza and the viruses might no longer be detectable by the time of death in some people."

The team estimated there were 284,500 deaths from swine flu in the 12 months from April 2009. But the figure may be as high as 575,400, they said.

Between 250,000 and 500,000 people die of seasonal influenza every year, according to the WHO. — AFP