

Swine flu death toll 'was far higher'

NEW STUDY: 2009 pandemic killed 284,500 people, not 18,500

NEW YORK

THE swine flu pandemic of 2009 killed an estimated 284,500 people, some 15 times the number confirmed by laboratory tests at the time, according to a new study by an international group of scientists.

The study, published yesterday, said the toll might have been higher — as many as 579,000 people.

The original count, compiled by the World Health Organisation, put the number at 18,500.

Those were only the deaths confirmed by lab testing, which the WHO itself warned was a gross underestimate because the deaths of people without access to the health system go uncounted, and

because the virus is not always detectable after a victim dies.

The new study also shows the pandemic's impact varied widely by region, with 51 per cent of deaths in Africa and Southeast Asia, which account for only 38 per cent of the world population.

"This pandemic really did take an enormous toll," said Dr Fatimah Dawood of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), who led the study.

"Our results also suggest how best to deploy resources. If a vaccine were to become available, we need to make sure it reached the areas where the death toll is likely to be highest."

Swine flu, caused by the H1N1 virus, infected its first known vic-

tim in Mexico in March 2009. By April, it had reached California, infecting a 10-year-old, and then quickly spread around the world.

The CDC warned Americans not to travel to Mexico. Egypt ordered the slaughter of all its pigs in a misguided attempt to contain the virus, which was in fact spread from person to person.

The fears reflected the unusual nature of the virus, which contained bird, swine and human flu viruses.

Scientists were unsure how transmissible or deadly this flu would be, but early signs were ominous: the WHO declared swine flu a pandemic in June 2009, when labs had identified cases in 74 countries. **Reuters**