This paper interrogates modelling’s use value to public health governance via the case of the Australian response to H1N1 (2009). Infectious disease modelling’s reach into public health coincides, not only with developments in virology and computing, but with the securitisation of public health, i.e. responding to disease as a security threat. Modelling’s principle use value has been to provide simulations of catastrophic security threats and of potential interventions into such disasters. The paper examines how during H1N1 (2009), as modelling was appropriated into a securitised mode of public health governance, modellers found themselves enjoined to take responsibility for the incalculable. This work had limited value for the public health response. What was useful came from entirely different quarters and came in the form of a challenge to health security. Local public health actors, trained in epidemiological outbreak investigation tried to intuit, not calculate, what they could about the virus; they deemed the virus to be relatively mild and broke with the national command-control response. This forced a radical transformation within securitised public health governance. This analysis suggests that whether modelling can have the use value to which it aspires hinges on its connections to the normative political vision at work in disease securitisation.

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