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Health agencies drill for flu pandemic

The University of Michigan and Washtenaw County Public Health Department's preparations to reduce illness and disruptions from a pandemic triggered by avian flu or a similar virus are far surpassing the attention local businesses are giving to the issue.

Dr. Robert Winfield, chief health officer and director of the University Health Service said, "Most experts believe that a pandemic of influenza is highly likely in the next 10 years. In the last three centuries, we've had three each century, and it's been 39 years since the last one."

"If a pandemic hit, there might be as much as 30 percent absenteeism for as long as ten weeks. Not all of those would be from illnesses. Some would be because of people afraid to come to work, some from people home with kids," Winfield said.

"There could be large costs if businesses needed to shut down," Cindra James, public health coordinator at the Washtenaw County Health Department said. "It could be a huge economic blow."

Dr. Arnold Monto, an epidemiologist in the U-M's School of Public Health, is leading a landmark study involving 1000 U-M student volunteers examining whether surgical masks and hand sanitizer can slow the spread of the flu. The study is being funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

U-M is not waiting for the results. It has already stockpiled 50,000 surgical masks and Purell hand cleanser.

In addition, the university is stockpiling simple-to-prepare foods, antiviral drugs and supplies to open a 250-bed alternate care center to handle overflow from University Hospital.

"The preparation costs are relatively modest and are contained in our budgetary planning. For example, the masks cost \$5,000. If a pandemic were to occur, the costs are so hard to predict that we are aware that we will have to assume those costs and find ways to pay for them," Winfield said.

Currently there are experimental vaccines for the avian flu, but if a pandemic were to occur it would take four to six months for an appropriate vaccine to be manufactured, he said.

Dr. Stan Reedy, medical director of the Washtenaw County Public Health Department, said Michigan is stockpiling Tamiflu, an antiviral.

"Tamiflu limits infectiousness – you can use it to treat people as soon as possible after they develop symptoms and can use it prophylactically before they do," Reedy said. The goal of the state is to stockpile one million courses (a 10 day supply) of the drug, he said. Michigan's population is approximately 10 million.

Stockpiling essential supplies necessary for continuing business operations is a particular issue for the private sector. "Many have now turned to 'just in time' supplies, which makes them vulnerable to disruption.



HEALTH WATCH
Deb Merion

Not having inventory of critical supplies can make them vulnerable at times of disruption of gas or food supplies because truckers are ill or streets are blocked," Winfield said.

James recommends that businesses plan redundancies. "If one person is sick, there is someone else who knows exactly what they do, where the files are and where the keys are," he said.

Jesse Bernstein, president and CEO of the Ann Arbor Area Chamber of Commerce is not aware of any preparations being made by local businesses for the pandemic. "I've got nothing on this. I haven't heard anything about this topic," Bernstein said.

The county public health department is aware of just one local company – TCF Bank – that has indicated interest in pandemic flu preparations.

To practice for the disruption that a public health emergency would cause, U-M and Washtenaw County will join Wayne and Monroe counties in a live drill on May 16. Plans for the day are dictated in detailed county health department plans, called the Modular Emergency Medical System Model. This is the third drill scheduled in the last year.

During the drill, U-M will open its 250-bed overflow hospital in the Central Campus Recreation Building and test it with 100 volunteers. The county will test its neighborhood emergency help center, which consists of numerous locations that individuals can go to for help with illness, first aid, mental health, education, special needs, medications, and other issues.

All county activities for the pandemic flu are funded by a \$125,000 one year grant from the CDC, which funds all preparedness activities surrounding the pandemic flu including health educator time and fit-testing masks.

"More important than money is continued building of constructive relationships—we're very interested in drawing in private industry," Reedy said.

The health department would like to promote and develop volunteers who can assist in vaccinating a large number of people in a short period of time or distributing Tamiflu, he said.

"My main concern is that we develop our plans to provide information to people about pandemic flu and potential bio-terrorism diseases, because when people have basic information, even if it's just in time, that sense of knowing what one can do personally to protect yourself and your family allows people to avoid the panic mode," he added.

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