

Research Note

Handling a Pandemic

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Applicable Sectors: Public Health, Emergency Services.

In the year 2009, countries around the world experienced an outbreak of a flu pandemic due to a new strain of the H1N1 influenza virus. The outbreak which was reported to have originated in Mexico rapidly spread throughout the world affecting millions of people. Many government and health authorities in different parts of the world tried to control the spread of the virus by closing down cities and the public and private facilities within the cities. USA, Brazil, India, China and Mexico were the most affected nations with the highest number of reported cases of hospitalizations and deaths among all other countries.¹ It is challenging for health authorities to estimate the number of affected people because many people with the flu don't

seek medical care and only a small number of those who seek medical care are actually tested for the virus. The World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the USA have estimated that the number of unreported cases have crossed 100 million.ⁱⁱ

The health organizations in the US took numerous measures to prevent the spread of the virus in public places like schools, universities and other workplaces. The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with the help of the US Department of Homeland Security developed an updated guidance plan which the employers could use to develop or review their own prevention plans. The focus of the guidance plan was to make sure that employers are protecting people who are at a risk of getting affected by influenza related complications, maintaining their business operations and minimizing the adverse effects on their entities in the supply chain. It was apparent that the organizations across the country would have to manage their operations with a reduced workforce due to either the employees or their family members falling ill. The CDC and HHS urged the organizations that they should ask their employees to stay at home

even if the organization has to face any operational issues due to reduced workforce.

Due to the concern that the virus disproportionately affects people between the age of 6 and 24, numerous schools in different countries declared temporary closures as a precautionary measure. In USA alone, more than 600 schools were temporarily closed affecting 126,000 students in 19 states.ⁱⁱⁱ In August 2009, CDC recommended that rather than closure, schools and universities should allow students to stay home for either 7 days total or until 24 hours after symptoms subside - whichever is longer. CDC also urged schools and universities to suspend any rules related to penalizing grades based on attendance. CDC also came up with a detailed guidance plan for the universities which could be used to create awareness about the spread of the virus on campuses. CDC and HHS also made an active use of social media websites like facebook to create awareness about the disease among youths. Social media was also used as a tool to caution public about any spam myths in circulations about the disease.

Many universities in the US and abroad launched Pandemic Flu Prevention Strategies with the focus on creating awareness about the flu and responding urgently to flu cases on campus. The State

University of New York, for example, came up with a ‘Three Pronged approach to Pandemic Flu’. The three critical aspects of this approach were – Prepare, Educate and Respond. These aspects included several measures like launching a webpage to post all the flu related news and events, creating a university wide planning group to provide system-wide guidance on critical issues pertaining to the flu, developing tools to integrate information collected from various sources, developing channels to communicate flu related information to the state health authorities, creating points of distribution for the vaccine and so on.^{iv}

The measures taken by the University of Washington were on the same lines. The UW Hall Health Center also implemented several channels for creating flu awareness and distribution points for the vaccine. The Hall Health Center also developed a Flu Surveillance tool to get a count of the number of flu cases on campus. A Flu Symptoms Self-Assessment was also developed for people who were not sure if they should visit a doctor for their flu-like symptoms.^v Through campus wide emails and posters, universities also made sure that the updates related to the flu vaccines reach the students and staff. The vaccines were made available on university campuses at special discounted rates so that everyone could afford it. All these measures which were geared

towards ensuring a control on the spread of the virus on campus were based on the guidelines suggested by the CDC and HHS.

The flu vaccine which was available starting November 2009 has been in heavy demand across the world. There have been shortages of the vaccines in several places even though the pharmaceutical companies have started the vaccine production at rate of 3 billion doses per year. Even though the health authorities are making efforts to ensure the vaccine availability, many people have already assumed the pandemic to be over and are not taking the doses. As per a report by New York Times, by the end of January 2010, only about a fifth of Americans had taken some form of vaccine. Only 40% of children and teenagers had taken the vaccine even though they are most vulnerable to infection. Michael T. Osterholm, the Director for the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota said in a media report that the number of people taking vaccine will increase as there might be a third wave in late February.^{vi} Health authorities are urging people to take the doses through various media channels to ensure that the flu does not spread much in case there is third cycle of the flu.

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_flu_pandemic



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ⁱⁱ http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/estimates_2009_h1n1.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33520744>

^{iv} <http://www.suny.edu/sunyNews/News.cfm?filename=2009-10-14%20Final%20SUNY%20and%20H1N1-%20Prepare,%20Educate,%20Respond.htm>

^v <http://depts.washington.edu/hhpcweb/h1n1/wp/>

^{vi} <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/06/health/06flu.html>