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Health officials try for balance

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Risk NB Health looking to avoid unwarranted panic, undue complacency

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New Brunswick's pandemic influenza plan is about more than just treating the sick in hospitals.



BLOOMBERG NEWS

Laboratory workers prepare tests for H1N1 influenza in Athens, Ohio. Health officials in New Brunswick are trying to be realistic about the dangers of the virus without stirring up panic in the public.

While trying not to stir up panic, health officials are trying to be realistic about the dangers posed by the H1N1 virus.

It's not an easy task, since the public, tired of being bombarded by almost daily media reports, may have become complacent and bored with shocking numbers and unsettling predictions.

"Plenty of Canadians took it pretty serious two months ago, but decided it's mild, that the government exaggerated," said Peter Sandman, a risk communications consultant based in Princeton, N.J. "People are talking about it in the past now."

A recent study conducted by the Worldwide Independent Network of Market Research polled people in 19 countries on attitudes surrounding the H1N1 virus, commonly known as swine flu.

Researchers found only one in five Canadians is worried about a massive flu outbreak.

Still, New Brunswick Health is confident the public is sufficiently aware of potential pandemic dangers.

"I think peoples' attitude toward [the flu] is proportional," said New Brunswick Health spokeswoman Alissa Lee.

While the seasonal flu is, at this point, more ruthless than swine flu, the swine flu's potential is worse. Because most people aren't immune to the new strain, it's moving quickly through populations and targeting young, seemingly healthy individuals instead of older people, who are more susceptible to most flu strains.

"Everybody who looks at it agrees, it's less deadly than the seasonal flu so far," said Sandman. "But even something very mild, when it's very pervasive, kills a lot of people."

As winter sets in and people ward off the cold by spending more time inside, a common flu will come in contact with swine flu. And if some unlucky person becomes infected with both strains, the two types might intermingle, mix characteristics and then move on.

"Whenever a virus infects a new host, it's hard to predict what will happen," said Brian Lichy, McMaster University associate professor of infectious diseases.

"The flu can shuffle its genes with other flu's. If the same person gets infected with a human flu and the swine flu, you shuffle the deck."

In a normal case of the flu, mucus builds in the lungs so that when a sufferer coughs it carries the virus out. But with H1N1, a healthy immune system sometimes goes overboard, causing inflammation and damage.

"It leaves you more susceptible to bacterial infections," said Lichy, "especially pneumonia."

There have been 41 reported cases in New Brunswick so far - most of them mild - but provincial medical officer of health Paul Van Buynder revealed Thursday that this winter, 20 per cent of New Brunswickers will be infected with the virus. Only one of two per cent of those infected will require hospitalization.

Still, to fend off the complacency low rates of hospitalization might instill, Sandman believes governments should make the public aware of three points. One, H1N1 is pervasive. Two, cases have been mild so far. Three, expect the unexpected.

"They should know that it is going to be pervasive," he said. "It's already more pervasive than we think"; and the number of confirmed cases are just the tip of the iceberg."

While it might seem paranoid, Sandman recommends people stockpile food supplies and medication in case so many people get sick that hospitals and social services become overwhelmed.

New Brunswick Health also recommends a degree of stocking up, saying the Emergency Measures Organization always recommends people have 72 hours worth of supplies.

"The alternative to complacency is not panic," said Sandman. "Panic is when you run over your grandmother on the way to the drugstore."

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