

Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough Public Health

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Be Prepared So the Pandemic Flu Virus Doesn't Become Your Worst Nightmare

A quick scan of the planet today reveals at least six novel influenza strains infecting humans at the moment, as well as an outbreak in Saudi Arabia of "MERS-CoV", a relative of the SARS coronavirus. Wherever there is life, there are mutating viruses, often starting their journeys in animals and then jumping species to infect humans, sometimes by accident rather than intention. It is because of this constantly evolving nature of the influenza virus that pandemics in humans arise. And although we cannot predict when and where the next one will emerge, it is imperative to be prepared.

May 7-13 happens to be Emergency Preparedness Week in Ontario. In order to help everyone prepare, several organizations are working together to host a community event tonight at the city's Evinrude Centre: "Your Worst Nightmare", an interactive opportunity for all of us to hone our knowledge and skills to better prepare for the uncommon but possible nightmare scenarios, including the coming of the next pandemic.

As of April 28, there have been almost 1500 cases of Influenza A (H7N9) globally, almost all contracted from poultry in China. Two Canadians traveling in China brought the illness home with them in 2015, but fortunately the virus has not mutated to a version that is easily transmitted between humans. Yet. This strain of avian influenza is extremely deadly to humans – almost 40% of those sickened have died. It may or may not become our next pandemic. Internationally, countries are closely monitoring of all these respiratory pathogens in order to identify when and where an outbreak is occurring and to signal the possible start of an influenza pandemic.

Canada and each of the provinces and territories are prepared for emergencies like the next influenza pandemic. Legislation exists to declare emergencies and to provide the right people with the right decision-making authority to act in the public interest. Communities like Peterborough have plans, as do our local health care system providers. Partner agencies, workplaces and educational settings have plans as well, preparing for scenarios where students or workers may be stricken and absent, or fearful of attending. Because each year we experience a seasonal influenza epidemic, we are able to prepare and practice on a regular basis those key components that will also serve us well in a pandemic situation.

This is one of the reasons why each year we promote that all essential workers protect themselves against seasonal influenza by being immunized. And why we ask that all health care providers be immunized too. They will be first in line for a pandemic vaccine, but the reality is that in a pandemic situation, at least for the first wave, there will likely NOT be a vaccine ready. Influenza vaccines take months to develop, so in the first wave we will need to rely on prevention measures like social



distancing, the use of anti-virals for essential workers and health care providers, and perhaps even quarantine to minimize the risk of illness and death.

The local health care system will be taxed. Community doctors and nurses may need to cancel elective appointments to focus on the ill. Patients with milder illness will be asked to self-care at home. With the surge in hospital demand for the severely ill, there may be rationing of beds and even respirators as demand may outstrip supply. Here in Peterborough, public health already works with primary care and our hospital to plan for the seasonal influenza surge. Our Central East LHIN also works actively to manage the need for hospital beds and resources. In fact, we have a very broad intra-agency team that spans the county, city, Curve Lake and Hiawatha First Nations and the broader community to ensure that Peterborough will be ready for an influenza emergency.

I hope to see many of you out at our “Your Worst Nightmare” event tonight – in an emergency, you too will need to protect yourself and your household members. Come and learn how to do that better!

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For more information about Dr. Salvaterra, her bio is available on this webpage:

<http://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/about-us/about-us-2/our-medical-officer-of-health/>