

Preparing for a possible pandemic – the Mulgrave Pandemic Response Plan

Background information:

A number of independent, government and international sources are predicting a resurgence of H1N1 (“Swine Flu”) during the Fall of 2009. Experts are expecting that the H1N1 virus will change; not necessarily into a more deadly strain, but into a second wave of pandemic influenza that will affect significantly more people. A Canadian microbiologist and infectious disease expert at Mount Sinai Hospital, Allison McGeer, is expecting that about one third of the North American population may become infected with the H1N1 virus this Fall¹. It is important to remember, however, that the World Health Organisation (WHO) considers the overall severity of the pandemic to be ‘moderate’, which means that most people recover from infection without the need for hospitalisation or medical care.

What is a pandemic?

A pandemic is defined by the WHO as an “epidemic of infectious disease that is spreading through human populations across a large region; for instance a continent, or even worldwide. A pandemic can start when three conditions have been met:

1. emergence of a disease new to a population;
2. agents infect humans, causing serious illness; and
3. agents spread easily and sustainably among humans”.

It is important to note that a disease is not a pandemic merely because it is widespread or has potentially severe complications; it must also be infectious.

H1N1 in British Columbia

According to governmental sources, as of August 21, 2009, the BC Centre for Disease Control had confirmed that 765 individuals in British Columbia have tested positive for the H1N1 virus that has caused illness in the U.S., Mexico and many other countries. However, the reported number is believed to reflect only a small proportion of the cases in BC as other public health tracking measures demonstrate that H1N1 is circulating throughout the province².

Possible School Closures

Schools can act as amplification points for pandemics (particularly influenza), and children and youth are thought to play a significant role in introducing and transmitting a virus within their households. Moreover, as the H1N1 virus has shown a preference for younger people, with those aged 5 to 24 making up a larger proportion of cases, the Ministry of Education has identified 3 possible scenarios in dealing with a resurgence of H1N1:

1. Stage 1 – No school closures in BC
2. Stage 2 – School closures (either single or multiple school closures in a BC community)
3. Stage 3 – Regional or province-wide school closures (multiple school closures in multiple communities across BC)

¹ Shereen Dindar, CTV.ca News http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20090711/h1n1_spread_090712/20090712

² Up to date statistics for BC can be found at <http://www.bccdc.ca/discond/DiseaseStatsReports/influSurveillanceReports.htm>

A Mulgrave Pandemic Response Plan

We are continuing to monitor the situation carefully and implement the necessary measures in accordance with Ministry guidelines³. It is important to note, however, that there is limited and conflicting evidence about the effectiveness of school closures in preventing transmission and in reducing serious outcomes of influenza. However, we are currently working on plan to respond, should the need arise. This plan will incorporate:

- a) Mulgrave Emergency Response Team: Identify team members and articulate clear roles and responsibilities.
- b) Education: Promoting healthy practices (such as regular hand-washing), correct method of covering a cough, identifying illness and staying home.
- c) Global Outreach: Plan 2009/2010 excursions in accordance with timelines and expectations of an H1N1 outbreak.
- d) Communications Plan: Develop a communications plan to ensure appropriate and timely communication to students, parents, faculty and staff, and local health authorities. This will include a phone/communications tree, and the possible use of translators where applicable.
- e) Continuity of Instruction: Establish alternative strategies for learning and teaching to ensure continuity of instruction in the event of prolonged school closures.
- f) Systems and Janitorial Services: Identify and develop strategies, protocols and systems of administration, janitorial services and food services in case of disruption.
- g) Separation, Supervision and Transportation of Sick Students: Develop a plan to address the separation, supervision and transportation of students who fall ill while at school.
- h) Recovery Plan: Develop a plan to return to normal operation following upon extended school closure.
- i) Other considerations and strategies:
 - a. Students with underlying medical issues and compromised immune systems
 - b. Alternative use of the school during a pandemic
 - c. Counselling
 - d. Other activities that may take place in the school building, within or outside school hours
 - e. Confidentiality of student health information while ensuring that the response to potential risk is adequate.
 - f. Planning for school based vaccination programmes should this be available/deemed necessary.

³ For additional up-to-date information on H1N1, please visit www.gov.bc.ca/h1n1.