

Don't be pig headed – plan for swine flu

Catherine Heffernan says swine flu is nothing to be sneezed at. Councils need good plans in place and we should all make sure we treat hygiene seriously.

I am an avid reader of women's magazines, especially the celebrity gossip kind. One of my biggest treats is to sit down on a Friday evening, cup of coffee in hand and read the week's hottest news. A month ago, I flicked open page to see the television couple 'Speidi' (Spencer and Heidi) posing on a beach in Mexico with face masks on. Swine flu had cut their honeymoon short. Almost immediately, the phones were hopping with questions. "Can I get swine flu from tinned pork?" "I'm off to a BBQ, they're serving pork, would I cancel?" "My sister is getting married in New York. I think the wedding is near a Mexican community. Is it safe to go? Is it safe to fly?" The panic had started.

A panicky public is one thing, panic-struck service providers is quite another. A fellow public health registrar told me last week that she was woken up during the night by a pharmacist who had run out of paracetamol and realised that in a pandemic he had no way of getting more. She told him to check his flu plan. He had none. This man

was typical of some of the people I have encountered over the years regarding pandemic flu. They either don't believe it is going to happen or they think that someone else is going to do the work for them. They won't. Pandemic flu is everyone's problem.

I was involved in the pandemic flu planning for a number of years both on a national and on a local level. I know how much hard work has gone into preparing for it and I am confident that using lessons learnt from previous pandemics, we are able to deal with it.


I also know how vital it is that local authorities as well as health services have proper flu plans which are most importantly tested and updated regularly. I was amazed at a meeting some years ago that a flu plan of a council consisted of a grid, one page in length. I asked about the content of each cell and was told that that was one department's flu plan, that cell was another's. However, no one at the table had seen them. They had no idea, for example, how refuse collection would continue,

how the offices would be staffed or how petrol was going to be allocated to help people get to work. If swine flu does one good thing, I hope it is to reinstate how crucial it is that everyone knows how to keep things going in a flu pandemic.

So what is swine flu and how can we prevent its spread? Swine flu is a respiratory disease in pigs. It spread pig to human and then person-to-person. Getting flu from pigs is not a new phenomenon (indeed it has been the most common way until the bird flu). The pig has been known in the past to get an avian flu, a human flu, the two get mixed and a new flu virus is created to which no one has immunity and can cause widespread devastation. The swine flu has just been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation but so far, it has not been that severe.

Swine flu, like other flu viruses, are spread through droplets which are expelled in coughs and sneezes. If people cough or sneeze without covering their noses and mouths, others are at risk of breathing in the droplets. Flu can also be spread by unwashed hand onto surfaces. Flu viruses can live for up to 72 hours on hard surfaces (transferred to hands up to 24 hours), 24 hours on soft furnishings (transferred to hands up to two hours after contamination) and five minutes on hands. The best way to stop the transmission of flu is simple. Cough or sneeze into a tissue and bin it. And wash your hands in hot soapy water! I don't know how to emphasise this enough. Washing your hands before touching your mouth is so important to killing the virus. If you carry an alcohol gel, rub your hands in it for 30 seconds as this will inactivate the virus.

If you fall ill, stay at home. You can check your symptoms on line or by phone and call a friend. It is important that you have a network of friends to help you out. You may need pain-killers to lower temperature and there is a huge stockpile of antiviral drugs in the UK. Remember though antiviral drugs are not a cure. They can only relieve some of the symptoms and reduce the length of time you are ill by around one day. As yet, there is no vaccine for swine flu.

And the masks modelled by 'Speidi'? They won't protect you from getting infected. Good hygiene and good business contingency plans are what will get us through. Check out your today. 



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