



The Pandemic Planner

A Monthly Newsletter for Health Care Professionals

Emergency Management Unit, Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care

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In 1918, a United States Senator, Hiram Warren Johnson, coined the phrase, "When war is declared, truth is the first casualty." My team and I have heard a new take on this quote at recent pandemic planning conferences and events - "The first casualty in any emergency is the truth!" This got us talking about the importance of communications and information sharing in pandemic planning and during response efforts.

We know from experience how important information sharing is during times of health emergencies and what can happen if there are breaks in our communication networks, systems and protocols. We know the value of communicating and Justice Campbell echoed this value in his third and final report.

This month's issues of the *Pandemic Planner* will take a look back at what communication tools and systems are in place to support information sharing during health emergencies and response activities. It also takes a look forward on ways we can further cultivate information sharing as part of our on-going planning activities. We hope you enjoy this issue and that it informs your planning efforts!

~ Allison J. Stuart, Director, Emergency Management Unit

Information Sharing – We Have the Tools!

Communications: The Roles and Responsibilities in an Influenza Pandemic

A key component to an effective response is an inclusive communications and information sharing process(es). To support this important component, the 2006 Ontario Health Plan for an Influenza Pandemic (OHPIP) includes a chapter on communications, complete with tools (chapters 12 & 12A). The plan also details roles and responsibilities, the information sharing cycle, and features additional resources and systems in place to support streamlined communication efforts and information sharing. In addition, there is the communications tool kit, which can be modified to meet the needs of your organization.

Why is information sharing and communications planning important to an effective response? This planning helps ensure that every part of our integrated health care system is aware of its roles and responsibilities during an influenza pandemic. Communication planning also ensures the system can make informed decisions and that accurate information is shared at all levels.

During your planning activities, refer to chapters 12 & 12A of the OHPIP (see Chapter 12; p. 12-5 for an overview of roles and responsibilities). Know what your communications roles and responsibilities are and ensure your plans include mechanisms and protocols to support accurate and up-to-date information sharing – with the province, across and within your organizations (including staff, volunteers and students) and stakeholders.

Additional Communication Supports

Since 2003, the ministry has set in place formal communication and notification processes alerting government, the health care sector and local health units to the presence of an emerging/abnormal event, developing emergency, or an outbreak. These processes include:

1. The Important Health Notice (IHN)

This alert bulletin provides important information on emerging health situations as well as requirements for increased alertness/vigilance for specific symptoms, reporting directives and any actions that may be necessary to mitigate risk and eliminate the threat.

The IHN system includes more than 1,900 organizations, with 34,000 recipients listed, and uses fax and e-mail as the main means of distribution. IHNs are also posted on the ministry web site at: www.health.gov.on.ca/emergency.

Since introduced in December 2003, the ministry has issued 26 IHNs to alert the health care sector to an emerging health concern, health incident or emergency. To subscribe to the IHN distribution list, or to have your information updated, please email us at: emergencymanagement@moh.gov.on.ca. Please make sure your team's administrative support staff are aware of this importance bulletin and that they bring it to your immediate attention.

2. 24-Hour Health Care Provider Hotline

The ministry also established a 24-hour hotline that is available in times of a health emergency. The purpose of this hotline is to support health care providers, respond to questions from health care professionals, including emergency and community physicians,

nurses and paramedics regarding IHNs and health emergency directives. When activated, the hotline is staffed by health care professionals.

3. The Information Cycle in a Health Emergency

By now many of our health care sector stakeholders are familiar with the information cycle, and its role in health emergencies. This cycle is a vital communications system for ensuring a well-coordinated response to all types of health emergencies, and is a reliable information system you can count on. It also ensures that the health sector gets information regarding a health emergency first, before the broader community.

In 2005, the cycle was amended to include the broader health care sector. Including professional associations and regulatory bodies not only ensures provider groups, the public and the media receive regular timely reports, but also strengthens our collective responsibility to effectively inform the decision making process.

It is important that your organization's communications strategies and protocols align with the information cycle. Doing so will strengthen a better coordinated response and will help ensure consistent messaging and information is available across organizations, for staff and stakeholder, patients, clients, media and the public.

For more information on the cycle, visit Chapter 12 of the OHPIP or visit: www.health.gov.on.ca/emergency.

Looking Ahead: Cultivating Information Sharing

Local Inter-Agency Planning

The Emergency Management Unit receives many requests from the local and community levels about information and resources available to support inter-agency planning, as well as for connecting local planners to discuss ideas and solutions to unique planning situations.

To help information sharing between organizations, communities and regions, each month, the *Pandemic Planner* has profiled inter-agency planning in various communities across the province.

Looking at additional ways to build information sharing at the local and community levels, the ministry will be creating a "Local Pandemic Planning" section on the web site. The section will feature web links to inter-agency plans and resource information that are currently posted on-line. You can assist us in these efforts by e-mailing us your link(s) to: emergencymanagement@moh.gov.on.ca.

Information Cycle – Broader Health Care Sector Participation and Exercise

The ministry is in the process of identifying representatives of key health care sector stakeholders reflective of health care employees and employers who will participate on 8:30am Information Cycle teleconference/video conference call. Many of these organizations have already created information processes that align with the ministry's cycle.

Once this process is completed, an exercise will be conducted with identified stakeholders to test the system and the process. Stay tuned for more information.

You Asked....?

- The OHPIP Communications Sub-committee is gearing up to reconvene in the near future. Members of the redesigned sub-committee will be notified of the meeting date, place and time shortly.
- There are 10 new public fact sheets on influenza pandemic planning. These are available on-line at: www.health.gov.on.ca/pandemic. New facts sheets for health care professionals are in development and will be made available on-line when complete

Local Profile – Ottawa Public Health

In September 2005, Ottawa Public Health launched Version one of Ottawa's Interagency Influenza Pandemic Plan. Based on the functional approach of the City's all-hazard Emergency Plan, the responsibilities were modified to respond to the needs of a pandemic.

The plan was developed by a Pandemic Steering Committee, led by Ottawa Public Health and with representatives of the City's Office of Emergency Management, public health laboratories, hospitals, long-term care facilities and community-based health care providers. It is designed to coordinate with provincial and federal plans.

This year's inter-agency pandemic preparedness agenda includes three table-top exercises to test the inter-agency command and control structure, using the Incident Management System. More background information on the inter-agency plan can be found at:

<http://www.ottawa.ca/pandemicinfo>; or by calling: 613-580-6744 / 1-866-426-8885 or 613-580-9656 (TTY).

Ottawa Public Health is also developing a web portal to communicate with the community in the response phase. This is being done in collaboration with the Champlain District Local Health Integration Network and will coordinate with their web portal for the region's health care professionals.

Important Dates:

- **March 12, 2007** – A one-day Community Resilience Workshop is being held to examine existing health emergency management tools and protocols that reduce client risk in Toronto.
- **March 26, 2007** – The Ontario Hospital Association is hosting the "Improving Access to Emergency Care" conference in Toronto.

Useful Resources On-Line

"Transmission of influenza A in human beings" – this article is available on-line at the Lancet under early on-line publications at: <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/eop>. The article focuses on strategies to minimise the transmission of influenza to health-care workers and patients. Congratulations to authors Gabrielle Brankston, Leah Gitterman, Zahir Hirji, Camille Lemieux and Michael Gardam!

"Best practices for communicating with the public during an outbreak": This is a report from the WHO Expert Consultation on Outbreak Communications. It can be found at: http://www.unicef.org/influenzaresources/files/WHO_CDS_2005_32.pdf

"Understanding the chain of communication during a disaster" discusses the importance of all voluntary healthcare professionals learning the chain of command within the disaster response system. The article is found in: **"Perspectives in Psychiatric Care Vol. 43, No. 1 February, 2007"**