



The Pandemic Planner

A Monthly Newsletter for Health Professionals

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

March 2008

Pandemic planning – what is it all about? Is its purpose simply to develop plans and stockpiles in and for our health system? Should our efforts focus on mitigation and prevention as much as planning and response activities? What about education and awareness and who should be involved in the process – the health system in general, clinicians, front-line health workers, the public? What role can and should non-government, voluntary or the private sector play? These are all very important questions and aspects that affect and influence the work we do everyday – and there is no easy answer other than “all of the above.”

This month’s issue of the *Pandemic Planner* highlights the importance of the questions raised above and details some of the initiatives taking place beyond the development of pandemic plans. This issue also features a guest contributor, Dr. Brian Schwartz, who is, among other roles, the Scientific Advisor to the Emergency Management Unit.

As always, we hope you find the March issue of the *Pandemic Planner* informative and that it encourages you to continue to develop and implement key strategies that support influenza pandemic planning – for your patients, staff, organization and our health system.

~ Allison J. Stuart, A/Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Health Division

What’s New?

New Agency for Health Protection and Promotion – Ontario’s first ever, arms-length public health agency

Many of our subscribers will know that on March 4, 2008, the provincial government announced the appointment of Dr. Vivek Goel as the Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion first President and CEO. The announcement coincided with the fifth anniversary of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in Ontario and builds on the provincial government’s commitment to Operation Health Protection.

Similar to those operating in British Columbia, Quebec and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States, Ontario’s new agency will support the Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) and provide expert scientific leadership and technical advice for, and within, the health sector.

The agency will bring academic, clinical and government experts together to create a centre for specialized research and knowledge in public health. Work will focus on the areas of infectious disease, infection control and prevention, health promotion, chronic disease and injury prevention and environmental health.

The agency will also provide rapid on-site field support (as requested by the CMOH), specialized communication and training, as well as standards input and practical tools for implementing best practices and support in responding to health-related emergencies and outbreaks, including an influenza pandemic.

The office will be named the *Sheela Basrur Centre* after the former CMOH and Medical Officer of Health for the City of Toronto during the SARS outbreak.

For more information about the agency, its work and board of directors, please visit www.oahpp.ca.

Just Clean Your Hands – An update on this important infection control program

In the January issue of the *Pandemic Planner*, we featured the “coming soon” *Just Clean Your Hands* program. The program has arrived and was launched on March 5, 2008.

The Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) has partnered with Ontario’s Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (the ministry) to deliver train the trainer sessions on the components of the *Just Clean Your Hands* program. Regional sessions have been offered across the province, with hospitals invited to send up to three representatives.

In addition to the train the trainer sessions, there is a dedicated website that provides easy access to information and materials, as well as a discussion forum where hospitals and staff can share success stories and lessons learned.

If you represent a hospital in Ontario, please make use of this important evidence-based program designed to enhance infection prevention and control in our health system. Visit: www.justcleanyourhands.ca.

Bug Out! Get the Facts on Germs – Involving students and families in illness prevention

During an influenza pandemic, amongst a number of actions to be taken, we will be required to activate and integrate our response plans, access stockpiles of personal protective equipment (PPE), and implement required infection prevention and control requirements. We will also need to communicate with and educate the public on the latest information including what to do to, where to go, and how to limit the spread of the illness.

There is no doubt that we will be focusing our efforts on a collective and integrated response, so the question becomes: What can we do now to engage the public and help create basic healthy habits to prevent the spread of illness?

This was a key question for the ministry when asked to partner with the Canadian Red Cross Society on the development of a health emergency educational program for school-aged children and families in Ontario. It wasn't a difficult question to answer and through this partnership, the ministry and the Canadian Red Cross Society created *Bug Out! Get the Fact on Germs*.

This exciting and fun-filled program is linked to Ontario's Health and Physical Education and Science and Technology core curriculums, and includes student activity booklets and facilitator guides for the following grades: kindergarten – grade 3; grade 4 – grade 6; and grade 7 – grade 8. There is also a family program that is available for use at home.

Bug Out! Get the Facts on Germs makes it fun and easy to learn how to prevent illness, stay healthy and how to make simple illness prevention techniques part of our daily, life-long habits.

Here are some of the things children, teachers, caregivers and families will learn through *Bug Out! Get the Facts on Germs*:

- How bacteria and viruses are spread;
- Hand hygiene;
- Cough and sneeze etiquette;
- Staying home when you are sick;
- Immunization/vaccination; and
- Influenza pandemic (and other historical pandemics and health phenomena).

Bug Out! Get the Facts on Germs was released on March 3, 2008, and it is the first program of its kind in Canada. The program is available for download in English and French on the ministry's web site at:

www.health.gov.on.ca/emergency , and through the Canadian Red Cross Society's web site at: www.redcross.ca/bugout . Links to the resources are also available through the Regional Infection Control Networks' web site at: www.ricn.on.ca/ .

The ministry is aware that many health units and regional infection control network coordinators receive inquiries from school boards, teachers and families about basic infection control techniques and programming available for children. As such, the ministry is providing a complete set of the program in hard copy to 36 Ontario public health units and each regional infection control network coordinator to help promote this important program in the communities they serve.

Help us promote this important program. Please share the *Bug Out! Get the Facts on Germs* web links with a teacher or take a moment to download the family guide and use it at home. A little prevention goes a long way in keeping everyone healthy and safe all through the year.

Planning For an Influenza Pandemic – Why bother?

By: Dr. Brian Schwartz

It's fascinating to read the correspondence and media reports spanning the spectrum of opinions on planning for an influenza pandemic. On the one hand - five years after the SARS outbreak – we hear that not enough has been accomplished. On the other, some experts wonder why we expend so much time and effort planning for an event on which we have no idea on time, place, or scope of occurrence. As this debate and dialogue continues there are ongoing reports that avian influenza is rampant in some parts of the world; and although its impact on the human populations is relatively low, case fatality rate is high. While the H5N1 strain has been in Asian, African and even some European populations for almost a decade, the feared world-wide pandemic has yet to appear!

What do we make of all this? How do we balance the need for preparedness with the myriad other issues for which we must prepare such as an aging population, hospital overcrowding, wait times, health providers and practitioner shortages and the balance between health promotion and disease management? I would suggest that the answer lies in the process of planning rather than the outcome.

One of the great challenges we faced during SARS was the disconnect between various silos in the health system: hospitals, community practitioners, public health units, government, business and the public at large.

As has been pointed out repeatedly by the many post SARS commissions and post-scripts, any degree of success that we had in managing the outbreak was due to the heroic efforts of both front-line clinicians and public health officials who worked tirelessly day and night under very difficult circumstances to bring the disease under control.

Our efforts over the ensuing years have been geared toward developing a better overall system to manage these biological and other threats from the ground up and to build the infrastructure to do so. In order to be successful in these initiatives, we need to break down the divisions between health sectors and jurisdictions.

In my role as Scientific Advisor to the Emergency Management Unit (EMU), I participate in a number of planning committees and work groups. Thus, I have had the opportunity to meet and work with health practitioners of all disciplines and backgrounds as well as members of other government ministries, the private sector and the public. And I actually observe these people talking to each other! These initiatives, including planning exercises from tabletop to full scale, give us an opportunity to work together and plan for a pandemic. But they also give us the opportunity to meet each other, understand our respective roles and be inclusive in how we address them. We also might discuss issues in health beyond pandemic planning. And by doing this, we may begin to address other challenges in a similar matter.

Our work can be greater than the sum of its parts. For example, some of the tools the Ontario Health Plan for an Influenza Pandemic (OHPIP) Primary Care Working Group is developing have been informed by the work of the OHPIP Pediatric Working Group. The OHPIP Steering Committee has a membership which includes clinicians and nurses, and representatives from public health, labour and associations - all working together to produce a product accessible to everyone. Although we don't always agree, and the OHPIP is a work in progress that will never be fully complete, we have come a long way in influenza pandemic planning.

More importantly, we have come a long way in breaking down some of the silos within which we normally function. This has the potential to help us

address many issues in the health system that challenge policy makers, planners and clinicians alike. As representatives from all environments of the health sector, can we begin to develop the systems that will address not only emergency preparedness, but day-to-day activities to deal with many of the issues facing us? The answer lies in redefining the processes that we use to address these issues in as integrative a manner as possible. In other words, the most important outcome of pandemic planning may be the process itself.

Dr. Brian Schwartz is an emergency physician at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, and the Director for Prehospital Care at the Sunnybrook Osler Centre. He is also the Scientific Advisor to the EMU, a member of Provincial Infectious Diseases Advisory Committee (PIDAC), chairs the OHPIP Training Working Group, and co-chairs the OHPIP Primary Care Working Group.

Emergency Preparedness Week – Help us get the word out!

Our efforts in pandemic planning help us to prepare for all types emergencies that impact and affect the health system. From May 4 to May 11, 2008, Emergency Preparedness Week will be celebrated across Canada. As health professionals, we have an important role to play in emergency preparedness and being prepared and planning ahead is critical to protecting our own and the public's health and safety.

Emergency Preparedness Week is a great opportunity for health organizations to promote personal preparedness among staff and management. It is also an opportune time to showcase your organization's planning accomplishments including influenza pandemic planning and that of your joint occupational health and safety committees; as well as any infection prevention and control initiatives that are underway.

To help support your organization in promoting emergency preparedness week, the EMU has developed online resources that can be used by Ontario's health sector. These resources are part of the ministry's *Emergency Preparedness Week Virtual Kit*, and include a variety of materials such as an article for newsletters, personal preparedness tip sheets, a list of event ideas for promoting the week, and much, much, more.

The online kit is available as of Monday, March 31, 2008. Please take a moment to visit the ministry's "What's New" section at: www.health.gov.on.ca/emergency to access this important resource. You may also wish to visit Public Safety Canada's Emergency Preparedness Week website at www.epweek.ca/.

You Asked....?

- The ministry is working with the College of Nurses of Ontario and the Nurse Practitioners' Association of Ontario (NPAO) to distribute Emergency Infection Control Kits (EICKs) to eligible and registered nurse practitioners in the province. Starting Monday, March 31, 2008 eligible nurse practitioners will be able to order individual kits online through a password protected order form. The web site url and corresponding password are available to eligible nurse practitioners who contact the NPAO at: 416-593-9779 or info@npao.org.

Local Profile

At the local Level - Exercising First Nations Pandemic Readiness

Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health (FNIH), Ontario Region, hosted a two-day pandemic preparedness tabletop exercise in Sudbury on February 13 & 14, 2008.

This event, funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada and FNIH, was the largest First Nations focused tabletop exercise held in Canada to date, with over 150 participants including representatives from First Nations leadership, community-based health providers, Ontario's local public health units, and the Ontario and federal governments.

The exercise was a fantastic opportunity for communities to test their pandemic response plans and focused on identifying gaps and challenges with respect to roles and responsibilities, communication mechanisms, and community emergency response procedures.

The exercise simulated a pandemic with origins in Asia, spreading quickly around the globe into First Nations communities in Ontario. As participants worked through the scenario, they were presented with a series of questions designed to stimulate discussion and analysis of their community response plan.

The energy level in the room was high as participants engaged in identifying planning gaps and challenges that they could take back to their community. As well, there was a real sense of collaboration as individuals shared lessons learned and best practices - taking the opportunity to acknowledge their collective success and achievements in pandemic readiness to date.

FNIH's Ontario Regional Director, Dr. Valerie Gideon agrees. "The tabletop exercise offered a great networking opportunity and showed communities that they are not alone in their pandemic planning efforts," noted Gideon. "The success of this exercise has provided participants with innovative ideas, as well as renewed confidence to continue revising and enhancing their plans."

At the end of exercise play, a formal debrief was held with the participants. As expected, the mock influenza pandemic exercise highlighted areas where improvements can be made to pandemic planning efforts in First Nations communities across Ontario.

Work is underway to finalize the exercise report, which will be shared broadly to enhance First Nations pandemic readiness at all levels of the health system – from the community up to the provincial and federal governments. It is anticipated that the exercise recommendations will help improve preparedness efforts going forward.

For more information on First Nations pandemic readiness, including information on the exercise report expected in summer 2008, contact Dr. Lilian Yuan at: lilian_yuan@hc-sc.gc.ca.

Important Dates: April - May 2008

- **April 21 – 23:** Health & Safety Canada 2008 will be held at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. For more information, please visit: http://www.iapa.ca/conference_2008/index.asp.
- **May 4 – May 10:** Emergency Preparedness Week is recognized across Canada.

Useful Online Resources

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/17464.html>: This section of the American Medical Association's website features a number of unique local/community level approaches and solutions to public health emergency planning.

<http://www.pnas.org/cgi/reprint/0706849105v1> This article, titled "Modeling targeted layered containment of an influenza pandemic in the United States," features three research groups using different individual-based, stochastic simulation models that examine the consequences of intervention strategies chosen in consultation with U.S. public health workers.