



Getting ready for the flu

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The most damaging influenza pandemic to strike Canada (and the world) was the Spanish flu that hit right after the First World War (1918-1919).

Interestingly, it was an early subtype strain of the H1N1 virus.

Like today's disease, it demonstrated a perverse tendency to kill the young and healthy.

Spanish flu was brought to Canada by returning veterans and spread to even the remotest hamlets. Children were orphaned and many families lost their breadwinners.

These deaths caused social and economic disruption. Commerce decreased from a lack of demand for goods and services as workers were sick and businesses could not fulfil their contracts.

In an attempt to halt the disease, municipal governments closed all but necessary services. Provinces enacted laws mandating the sick be quarantined and citizens wear masks in public.

That pandemic killed 50,000 Canadians and about 21-million globally. Most victims, weakened by the virus, generally died of pneumonia. Fortunately, the discovery of penicillin now saves lives.

This year's H1N1 virus was a novel strain of influenza with no vaccines to provide protection. Thankfully, the medical community has invented and tested the appropriate nasal sprays and injection vaccines. The Canadian government ordered 50.4-million doses at a cost of \$400 million.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported children have no pre-existing immunity to the virus while a third of seniors have the appropriate antibodies to fight the disease. Translation? Children and healthy young adults are most at risk.

This poses a unique challenge to employers and employees in Calgary where the average age is 33.

Ever helpful, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce has developed an Influenza Planning Toolkit for Business to help its members with their business continuity planning.

Many companies have not clearly thought through the potential absenteeism even a medium-sized pandemic could create.

- Do your clients know how your business will respond and what services you will keep or temporarily drop?

- Do employees understand if you plan to close the business or maintain a skeleton workforce?



- What types of precautions will your company enact to protect front-line service delivery people and clients visiting your premises?

- What safety measures will you take to encourage wellness amongst employees?

Many organizations have posted notices advising staff and visitors not to enter if they have influenza symptoms.

Other signs advise workers to wash or sanitize their hands, cover their mouths and noses with their sleeves and avoid touching their faces. Employees must stay home if they are ill or must care for sick children.

If all Calgarians make the extra effort to get vaccinated and take the precautionary measures to avoid transmitting the virus, this city will prove the prophets of pandemic doom wrong.

Worker absenteeism might cause declines in productivity elsewhere, but not here.

Other regions may see the projected drop of 4.8% to their gross domestic product because tourism sagged, planes, trains and automobiles were grounded and malls and grocery shops closed. British insurance giant, Lloyd's of London, envisages a pandemic on the scale of the Spanish flu has the potential to reduce global economic activity by up to 10%.

Last week, the World Health Organization announced at least 3,486 people had died from H1N1. Tragic, yes, but 4,000 Canadians die annually from normal seasonal flu. Hardly a pandemic so far.

If every employer, employee, and family takes the necessary steps, we can prevent the next wave of H1N1 from causing social and economic disruption here.