

# Hope for the best, prepare for the worst

## Emergency planners, personnel press on with flu pandemic

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THIS WEEK

Local health officials are prepared for the worst. They have taken the threat of a worldwide flu pandemic extremely seriously and developed a plan to handle an outbreak.

Dr. Garry Humphreys, local medical officer of health, says there's no way to prevent an outbreak from occurring but adds things can be done now to prepare for the inevitable.

Dr. Humphreys and other health unit staff members recently presented their plan to handle widespread illness in the Peterborough region. The health unit will work closely with emergency planners and personnel to keep citizens as safe and as comfortable as possible.

An emergency plan will be activated once a pandemic hits, says Dr. Humphreys. Representatives of several health-related fields will gather at the health unit to track the pandemic and make decisions on how to best deal with it. The health unit's emergency operations centre will be the lead agency but will work in conjunction with both the City and County emergency operations centres. Together they will make critical decisions including where to hold mass vaccination clinics, and the establishment of medication distribution centres and assessment centres.

"Every expert I've heard says it's not a case of if but a case of when," says Sandy Welsh, 911/emergency planning co-ordinator for the County of Peterborough.

Mr. Welsh says the County has already held mock pandemic emergencies to test if its plan works.

Trent Gervais, Peterborough's deputy fire chief and emergency management co-ordinator, says they will test their pandemic plan some time this year.

In the meantime, both the City and County will determine what essential services will be required if a pandemic strikes. Dr. Humphreys says emergency workers should be prepared for illness within their ranks and must plan accordingly. He adds private businesses should also start planning to deal with employee absence during a crisis.

It's unsure what type of flu virus could hit the population. There's great talk the Avian Flu could adapt and begin spreading from human-to-human. Right now, the virus is only being spread from birds to humans but Dr. Humphreys says it's only a matter of time before the virus

evolves.

Of all the influenza strains, the Avian Flu appears to be the most lethal in humans. Statistics released by the World Health Organization show there have been a total of 151 confirmed cases of Avian Flu in humans since 2003 in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Thailand, Turkey and Vietnam. In those cases, 82 people have died.

"Everyone is concerned over how lethal this virus is," says Dr. Humphreys.

To prepare, the World Health Organization has developed a contingency plan. All countries have been asked to create their own plans as well. In Canada, each province has mandated health units to develop emergency measures to deal with the pandemic.

Dr. Humphreys says no cases of Avian Flu have been reported in Canada. If it does arrive, officials expect it to first show up out west.

While preparations continue, Dr. Humphreys says work is being done to create a vaccine to fight not only Avian Flu but also other influenza strains.

"But we don't know what strain of influenza could cause the pandemic. Right now, we're worried about Avian Flu," says Dr. Humphreys.

Mr. Gervais says a lot of time and energy has gone into preparing for a pandemic and to ensure proper response.

"It could be like Y2K -- you put lots of money in it and nothing happens. But

I'd rather be criticized at all," he adds.

**'It could be like Y2K -- you put lots of money in it and nothing happens. But I'd rather be criticized for doing too much than nothing at all.'**