



STATEMENT BY DR VIJAY KUMAR DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH

OUTBREAK OF SWINE INFLUENZA IN THE AMERICAS

Background

Since 18th March, health authorities in Mexico and the United States have reported an outbreak of Influenza-like illness caused by a virus, belonging to the Swine Influenza family but considered novel, not having been previously detected in either pigs or humans.

Influenza is common amongst pigs, who are often routinely vaccinated against it by breeders. Swine influenza is also previously known to infect humans and the disease is usually mild. However, in this novel outbreak about 6% of the cases have been associated with deaths. At this stage, it is not clear whether the deaths were due to the virus itself or because of complications caused by other pre-existing disease and bacterial infection.

The majority of these cases have occurred in young adults. Most of the cases have had mild illness lasting less than a week, with the usual symptoms of mild flu. All cases have been transmitted from humans to humans. There is no vaccine against the virus, but it is sensitive to antiviral drugs if taken within 48 hours of onset of symptoms.

The disease is not transmitted through food and consumption of properly cooked pork is not a risk. At present travel to and from the area is probably the most significant risk factor.

After due consideration, the WHO yesterday decided not to escalate to the Pandemic alert (therefore it is not a "pandemic") and also not to issue any restrictive travel or trade advisories (this means that travel to Mexico and the USA remain unrestricted).

However, because there are confirmed outbreaks in two countries and because of the human-animal link, the WHO declared this outbreak to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). This means that health authorities have to report any respiratory illness in a traveller from the affected area, even if the disease is unconfirmed.

In order to comply with this PHEIC reporting requirement the GHA has today put in place a procedure, under which doctors have to report as "suspect" persons returning from the affected areas and having certain relevant symptoms.

Similarly countries all over the world including Spain, France, Britain, New Zealand, Canada etc. have reported suspected cases as yet unconfirmed.

Advice to the Public

1. If you have a respiratory illness and you have recently returned from an affected area you should inform your doctor of this fact.
2. Most cases are said to be mild and your treatment may not be different to that of the common flu and flu-like illnesses.
3. You may be asked to observe “voluntary isolation”. This means staying at home for seven days, to minimise the risk of spread to other people. Of course, if you need to go to Hospital or the Primary Care Centre you can do so.
4. The most important thing you can do to prevent spread to others and your family is to practise Respiratory Hygiene and Hand Hygiene.
5. Respiratory and Hand Hygiene means that you should
 - only cough or sneeze into a tissue;
 - if a tissue is not handy, never cough or sneeze into your hands as this practice facilitates the spreading of viruses (although this habit has been taught to children for generations), but cough or sneeze into your Upper Sleeve or some such washable garment
 - after coughing or sneezing, dispose of the soiled tissue carefully and WASH YOUR HANDS

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