

Report on the H1N1 Virus

CAAT-Academic Divisional Executive, September 2009

By now you may have read more about the H1N1 virus than you ever intended or wanted to read about. College administration has the obligation to provide a pandemic plan that protects the safety of the staff and public and they should engage the local unions in those discussions (Article 24.02 A of our collective agreement). Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury in such a potentially serious situation to leave planning solely to our colleges' administrations.

If your college has a plan you have likely read it and/or participated in its development. Just having a plan gives some comfort but it may be an illusion of safety. Some colleges do not even have plans in place and there is no comfort there.

If you do not have a plan in place then the local president should be sending a letter to the college president and the chair of the Board of Governors informing them of their obligations and liabilities in this situation. You may also file a grievance for their failure to meet the requirements of Article 24.

The Divisional Executive asked for and received plans from most colleges in the system. This work was done through the Employer/Employee Relations Committee (EERC) that is referred to in the collective agreement. (Our newly-created Health and Safety Committee cannot meet with the employer provincially until we negotiate the right in the collective agreement.)

We made this request so that we could analyze these documents and ensure that either best practices or appropriate practices were in place to protect our members. Our review of what we received did not give us confidence. What we saw emphasized who should be engaged but not what should be done to reduce risk. Where colleges have actively engaged the union locals and the Joint Health and Safety Committees (JHSCs) to focus on prevention, we commend them. However, where that has not happened locals need to make sure that it does.

Our other concern was that many of the plans were developed by consultants who omitted the JHSCs as a key part of the solution and further that the JHSCs were not considered as key to the solutions that were to be found. For the most part, colleges had plans that sidelined the local campus Health and Safety Committees and/or the union locals.

Our concern grew when we saw that several news releases indicated that amongst the most vulnerable in the population were those in the age cohort that makes up our student body. Many of our colleges developed pandemic plans focussed on how to handle a pandemic but devoted little ink to how the

pandemic could and should be avoided. Most policies also did not address collective agreement concerns such as sick leave application, workload modifications, additional workloads and health and safety such as protective devices.

Like other influenzas, the spread is most likely early in the incubation period. This means that it is especially important to identify those infected and keep them away from the workplace so that infection does not spread.

Recommendations Regarding Infection Prevention Measures

Monitoring and Reporting

Early identification of ill students, staff and faculty exhibiting symptoms of influenza is key to control

1. Provide basic information on how to recognize symptoms of Influenza to all parents/guardians, students, faculty and staff.
2. Encourage students, faculty and staff to monitor their health daily for symptoms of Influenza and encourage appropriate response by communicating what protocols are expected. For example, at this point, most employees do not know what is expected of them if they have symptoms, or if they have been near an identified case.
3. Faculty and staff should observe students for any signs H1N1 and encourage students who are ill to self isolate. Encouragement may require that students know that protocols are in place to ensure that absence due to symptoms will be accommodated.

Environmental Cleaning

Influenza viruses can survive on some surfaces for several hours to days but **are rapidly destroyed by cleaning**. Cleaning of objects and surfaces that are frequently touched by multiple students or staff, high touch surfaces such as doorknobs, faucet handles, computer keyboards, telephones, etc., will help to prevent the transmission of the influenza virus from person to person.

It is recommended that high touch surfaces be cleaned at least twice daily. No special disinfectants or waste handling practices are required for influenza; regular household or commercially available cleaning products are sufficient for this purpose, and waste handling would be according to usual standards.

Colleges are advised to increase the frequency of cleaning during school hours as well as monitoring hand cleaning supplies. All sinks in washrooms, kitchens and classrooms should be well stocked with hand-washing supplies at all times (i.e., soap and paper towels). Consider the use of alcohol-based hand rubs (with 60-90% alcohol) in classrooms without hand washing sinks and wherever there

are doors that require hand touching to exit. Locked sanitizers should be placed outside the door.

Workplace inspectors from the JHSC should ask to see the frequency of cleaning data and should find out if bleach or some other simple cleaning agent is being used and that hand sanitizers are refilled. All college personnel should report the absence of hand cleaners, towels, etc.

Hand Hygiene and Respiratory Etiquette

Hand hygiene and covering coughs and sneezes with one's sleeve are important means of preventing the transmission of pandemic H1N1 influenza virus. Information on hand hygiene and cough etiquette can be found at <http://www.fightflu.ca/prot-eng.html>.

Consideration should be given to providing increased numbers of hand wash stations (or alcohol-based hand rub stations) as well as tissues and waste receptacles throughout post-secondary and boarding schools. It is recommended that additional tissue supplies and waste receptacles be kept in supervised areas (i.e., classrooms). If alcohol-based hand rubs are provided to supplement hand washing facilities, locked dispensers that are permanently attached to a wall are recommended and should be located in supervised areas.

It should be noted that hand washing with plain soap and water is the preferred method of hand hygiene in schools as the mechanical action is effective at removing visible soil as well as microbes. In instances where hand washing sinks are not available, use of alcohol based hand rubs may be considered. If hands are visibly soiled, alcohol-based hand rubs may not be effective at eliminating the influenza virus.

All personnel requiring a mask should be trained on the proper use of the masks to avoid the risk of unintentional contamination.

Reporting

Establish mechanisms to monitor pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza virus activity in their setting and processes for reporting staff and student/child illness above normal expected absenteeism levels to local public health officials as required but also to the JHSC at each campus ; and

Establish a dedicated phone line and/or web-based method of receiving illness reports from students, staff and faculty; and

Develop a protocol to act upon the findings.

Isolation

Students/staff/faculty who become ill with influenza at home or in residence should be encouraged to self isolate until their symptoms resolve and they are feeling well and able to fully participate in all normal day to day school activities

(including intra/extramural activities). To help prevent transmission, good respiratory and hand hygiene practices are recommended, as well as, to the extent possible, having ill individuals stay two meters away from others.

Students/staff/faculty who become ill while attending classes or other school activities should isolate themselves by returning to their room or home until they are symptom-free and are feeling well and able to fully participate in all normal day to day school activities (i.e., intra/extramural activities). Ensure that this is reported.

The JHSC should consider developing plans to group students with Influenza in one part of the residence as a measure to contain the spread of the virus for on-campus residences and boarding schools. This may facilitate monitoring of ill students and prevention of transmission of the virus to others.

Communication

The JHSC has a responsibility to ensure that information is communicated to students, visitors and workers in the college regarding health and safety, equipment, procedures and practices. They should ensure that information on self care is communicated. A good source for information is <http://www.fightflu.ca/prot-eng.html>.

Consider information campaigns on:

- cough and sneeze etiquette,
- hand washing technique and frequency,
- self-care when ill,
- self-care when caring for someone who is ill,
- how to access healthcare for assessment of their medical condition if needed.
- reporting the absence of sanitizers, towels,etc
- practice of not touching your face
- flu shots
- invasion of personal space

Conclusion:

The most effective working model is the *Health and Safety Act* and, in particular, the need for the mandated monthly inspection system. However, the Act works only when we exercise our rights. The Divisional Executive will continue to press this issue with the employers' representatives. We will work with our provincial Health & Safety Committee and we will share information with you

that may be helpful in your work of supporting the JHSC at each of your campuses. But the safety of your college depends in large part on the local and the Joint Health and Safety Committees.

Our new Provincial Health and Safety Team made certain that we tabled a precautionary and prevention-oriented approach to the demands on Health and Safety that passed at our Provincial Demand Setting Meeting. Of course, we encourage you to support the work of our negotiating team generally but specifically in these efforts to advance these demands.

The purpose of this letter is to ensure that you are being provided with information and resources to encourage our local H&S committees and the locals to do the best job they can do to minimize the impact on our members and students.

As a Divisional Executive we are asking all colleges to hold a meeting of the union JHSC members and representatives at each campus of their college. Please share our ideas and do some brain-storming on prevention ideas that will allow the JHSC make your college safer. Turn your collective minds to creating a check list for you monthly inspections. And finally, any ideas that come out of those forums please communicate them to our Provincial Health and Safety members, Sam Maga maga1951@gmail.com and Bonnie Martel bmartel@cogeco.ca.

It is important that if there is no pandemic plan in place that this issue be brought to the attention of the Board of Governors to set up the liability aspect of not having the preventative measures in place at your college. This may assure your rights if you were to be affected as a result of not having a policy in place.

As this semester unfolds we encourage you to share with us the strategies and actions taken by your colleges so that we can coordinate the rights of all members provincially. It is only if we stand together that we are stronger. This may be a difficult time for our members and we are here to provide support to the locals during this period.

The Divisional Executive

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