

BIRD FLU PANDEMIC: HOW TO PROTECT YOUR DEPARTMENT

by Phillip Perry MA



Your department will be hit by a flu pandemic that sidelines a third of your workforce for three weeks. Or perhaps not. Confused? Health professionals are having a tough time forecasting the next move of the avian flu strain known to insiders as H5N1. This virus has distinguished itself from the run-of-the-mill seasonal flu we get every winter for two reasons: First, it has killed a large number of domestic fowl in Asia and Europe. Second, over 60 people many of them young and vigorous - who have contracted the virus have died. So far, humans have only gotten sick through contact with domestic birds such as chickens, but things may change. "We are looking at H5N1 because there is a potential for it to become a pandemic strain if it starts to move between humans," says Dan Rutz, a spokesperson at the Washington, D.C., based, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "The biggest problem is that we just don't know if or when that will happen."

A possible bird flu pandemic, then, is one more item to add to the unhappy list of disasters that can lay waste to the best of operations. The sobering numbers in the opening paragraph of this article were taken from a report issued in December by the Congressional Budget Office. Given the possibility of a severe disruption to your own department, now is a good time to formulate plans that will help you recover following a devastating event.

Plan your response

Buildings, data, equipment etc. protected by conventional disaster recovery plans will be little affected in the event of a flu

pandemic. The vulnerable targets this time will be people, and steps must be taken to protect them.

Your disaster recovery plan must be practical and detailed enough to be ready to go without delay should a pandemic strike. "With global airline travel as prevalent as it is today, it may be virtually impossible to keep the flu pandemic from spreading quickly," points out John B. Copenhaver, president and chief executive officer of Washington, D.C., based DRI International, an organization which certifies contingency planning professionals. "You may not have a lot of time to execute your plans." When designing your plan, refer to the excellent starting template developed by the CDC. Visit the federal government's official flu information site at www.pandemicflu.gov. Click on the "Business" tab and then on the hyper-link for the "Business Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklist." The checklist is extensive, but here are some key elements:

- Identify employees essential to the maintenance of operations.
- Train and prepare ancillary workers.
- Establish an emergency communications plan to include key contacts and processes for tracking employee status.
- Determine the impact of a pandemic on department financials.
- Implement guidelines to modify the frequency and type of face-to-face contact e.g. hand-shaking, seating in meetings, department physical layout, among employees and between employees and patients.
- Establish policies for staggered shifts.
- Establish policies for employees who have been exposed are suspected to be ill, or become ill at work.

Cross train workers

When a significant part of your work force is home with the flu, cross trained employees can go a long way toward keeping your department running properly. If employee A is absent, employee B should be able to substitute. Of course, saying's easier than doing. While many health care organizations have some level of cross training in place, developing a formal program can be difficult. Many times employers face resistance from workers looking to protect their personal turf. People want to retain their unique skills that help guarantee their jobs.

Promoting employee self-interest can help overcome resistance. Cross training is an easier sell if you can say, "this will help the department survive and preserve your job if disaster strikes."

Will Your Plan Work?

In the event of a flu pandemic, lack of preparation can result in costly panic. "Picture yourself in a situation in which someone walks into your department, pulls a handgun and demands money," poses Jeffrey Williams, president of Binomial International, a disaster planning consultancy in Ogdensburg, NY. "At such times you are not thinking about the state of your 401K; you are thinking about what steps you will take to survive the next couple of seconds." The same mental attitude, suggests Williams, will result with the arrival of a pandemic. Rather than looking around for your disaster recovery folder, you will need to take appropriate steps automatically.

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Prompt response requires prior planning. To bring home the severity of the challenge, Williams suggests trying this disaster drill: One morning have each employee draw a card from a deck and ask everyone who draws a spade to take a seat. Then, with 25 percent of your work force "gone", announce to the remaining employees, "now we will exercise our disaster plan." What will the reaction be? "People freak out if they do not have a workable plan ready to go," says Williams, who has run the drill before. "They find they cannot operate their department. Well, the same thing will happen if their work force is hit with a flu pandemic."

Avoid lawsuits

Your plan should also contain procedures to obviate liability for negligence if patients or visitors contract the flu from your employees. Given the nature of a pandemic, though, it is unclear at what point an organization is in danger of being sued.

"We have not had enough experience to make it readily apparent how a jury would impose a civil or criminal penalty," points out Copenhagen, who is a licensed attorney in Georgia. "The big question is, how do you come up with an articulation of duty of care? The courts will ask what a reasonable person would have done in the case of a pandemic, and the answer to that question really takes us into uncharted territory."

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At the very least, your disaster plan should include policies designed to minimize the risk of transfer of the virus from employees to patients and/or their families. Local health officials may recommend steps such as sending ill workers home immediately, reducing hand shaking, and the donning of face masks.

Stay flexible

Because the H5N1 virus is undergoing mutations, and virus behavior varies by form, developing a prudent response to a pandemic is more a work in progress than a cut and dried affair. The best you can do is monitor announcements about the virus's advance and respond appropriately to recommendations.

Stay in touch with your state and county health authorities who will update you on government policies and suggested responses in the event of a flu pandemic. "Your local health officials will discuss what if scenarios," suggests Copenhagen. "If there is an outbreak of bird flu, what does the public sector plan to do in terms of vaccine distribution and quarantine, for example?"

That last matter is an important issue. "A quarantine will keep some employees from getting to work," warns Copenhagen. "And a quarantine which includes your facility will impact everything that goes on in the facility. Anything physically getting into or out of your institution will be delayed, perhaps indefinitely."

While no one can specify with any accuracy the social and financial impact of a flu pandemic, prudent business people will keep an eye on the news and develop appropriate recovery procedures. "For every dollar you spend trying to prevent a disaster you save \$4 later when an event occurs," says Donald L. Griffin, vice president of personal lines at the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America, Des Plaines. "So it's wise to be proactive now and put policies in place that will insure your employees maintain good health practices in the event of a flu pandemic."