Dear Principals

Update on Human Swine Influenza

As you are aware, the human swine influenza continues to spread internationally. As at 23 May 2009 there are thirteen people in Australia who have been confirmed as having human swine influenza, most of whom have contracted the disease overseas.

A small number of schools in Victoria and South Australia have been closed for 7 days due to confirmed cases of human swine influenza amongst children attending these schools. These decisions were taken as a precautionary measure to contain any potential spread of the virus.

It is important to ensure schools are prepared for a similar level of action in NSW if required. NSW Health will communicate with independent and Catholic schools via the Catholic Education Commission of NSW and the Association of Independent Schools of NSW and the school involved to manage these situations.

A confirmed case of human swine influenza in a student who has attended school while infectious would result in that school being identified as a ‘school of interest’.

NSW Health will investigate each case identified and a decision would be made based on the level of exposure which may affect other individuals. Appropriate mitigation actions may include close contacts being placed into home isolation with antiviral treatment, increased social distancing at school or partial (eg, only the affected class or year), or complete, closure of the school.

Any decision to close schools would not be made lightly and full consideration would be given to the social support issues an unexpected closure may create for some families.

The incubation period of human swine influenza is thought to be up to seven days. People can be infectious with influenza for up to 24 hours before they develop any symptoms. This means that people who are infected could unknowingly spread the virus.

To limit the potential exposure I advise you to take steps to exclude students who may have been in countries that have had community or school transmission of the virus. Currently the countries are Mexico, USA, Canada, Japan and Panama. This list will be continually revised. This ‘exclusion’ approach would mean that students returning, or arriving, from a country affected by human swine influenza would be instructed to remain at home for seven days (the maximum incubation period) following their travel before returning to school. This will allow time for any illness related to that travel to develop, and for prompt assessment and treatment to commence. If they remain well after seven days they can return to school.

NSW Health is happy to work with schools on a case by case basis where the above situation applies to teaching staff. For example, in the context of a school excursion to a country that has had community or school transmission of the virus.
You should advise parents and staff of these precautionary measures prior to overseas travel where possible to assist them to make informed decisions and appropriate arrangements prior to travelling overseas.

Co-operation with these strategies is important for public health and safety. The primary objective of NSW Health is to delay and limit the spread of human swine influenza within the community. This is a very important strategy in the effective management of the current influenza threat.

Please remind staff and students about good hygiene practices and how to minimise the spread of infections.

Simple precautions that prevent the catching and spreading of seasonal influenza include

- covering your mouth and nose if you cough or sneeze
- washing your hands after contact with soiled tissues or any contact with nose or throat discharge
- if students or staff are sick, advise them to stay home and seek medical attention, if appropriate.

If you are aware of any students who have recently returned from overseas who are feeling unwell with any flu-like symptoms, please contact the parents or carers immediately and advise them to go to a hospital Emergency Department for assessment, or to ring their general practitioners if they are from rural areas where ready access to hospital may not be available. I also ask that you notify your local public health unit. Contact details maybe found on the NSW Health website at:


If you would like more information about human swine influenza, this can be accessed on the NSW Health website:


If you need advice on how to manage a situation at your school please contact your local public health unit.

I appreciate your commitment at this time to supporting your school communities by cooperating with relevant government agencies and reassuring staff and students that Australia has very strong planning and response measures in place to manage this health issue.

I will keep you up to date with relevant information.

Yours sincerely

Dr Kerry Chant
Deputy Director-General, Population Health and Chief Health Officer

24th May 2009.