



Serving Lee County Since 1947

Don't Panic: Bird Flu Movie was Fiction, Not Fact

I know that some of you reading this column tuned in to watch the recent made for television movie, "Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America". This movie followed an imaginary outbreak of the H5N1 avian flu virus from its origins in a Hong Kong market through its mutation into a pandemic virus that became easily transmittable from human to human and spread quickly around the world. Prior to the telecast of this movie, and based on several Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) staff previewing the movie, the HHS issued a set of talking points that local health authorities could use as a follow-up to the movie. The following information is adapted from that issued by DHHS.

First of all, this was a movie, not a documentary. It was a work of fiction made for entertainment; not a factual accounting of a real event. There currently is no influenza pandemic in the world. It is also important to remember that H5N1 avian influenza is almost exclusively a disease of birds and the virus has not yet appeared in the U.S., although experts predict this could occur in the near future. If and when the H5N1 virus appears in the U.S., it does not mean a pandemic has begun.

While the movie did serve to raise awareness about avian and pandemic flu, it is my hope that it inspired preparation and not panic. There are steps that individuals, families and communities can take to prepare. Keep a supply of food and medicines on hand in case you have to stay home. Practice good public health measures like washing your hands frequently and staying home when sick.

The movie depicted scenarios that could occur should a severe pandemic ever develop, such as limited availability of antiviral medication and vaccines, as well as the potential for disruption of supplies, medicines and other essential services. The film also illustrated the expected months-long delay in developing an effective vaccine against a pandemic strain of influenza once it emerges. Congress has approved funding for DHHS to make significant financial investments to improve technology for vaccine development and to increase vaccine production capacity, to ensure more rapid availability of vaccine for the population in a pandemic.

The film highlighted an important aspect of planning—that of individual and community planning and cooperation that will be crucial in sustaining communities and neighborhoods during an extended wave of an influenza pandemic. There are many planning documents, checklists and materials available for businesses, schools, healthcare providers, community organizations, as well as an individual and family guide at www.pandemicflu.gov.

At the local level, the Lee County Health Department staff has been working diligently on planning and preparedness for pandemic influenza. We have developed a plan for mass dispensing of medications or vaccine. We have conducted a small-scale medication dispensing exercise with staff and have another planned for later this summer. Additionally, we will test our



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plan on a larger scale this fall, when we hold one mass flu shot clinic as opposed to several smaller clinics throughout the county. This may not be as handy or accessible for some of our residents, but please be patient with us and keep in mind that we are using the clinic to practice and be better prepared to serve our residents in the event of pandemic influenza.

The health department staff is too small to cover all of the positions needed in an emergency event that makes necessary mass vaccination or medication dispensing. Therefore, we are compiling a list of volunteers who can be called upon to assist in such an event. We need people to provide site security, assist with form distribution and completion, and a host of other duties and tasks. If you would like more information or would like to volunteer, please contact us at 284-3371.

-Submitted by Cathy Ferguson, MPH, Public Health Administrator