

H1N1: Ignore at Your Own Risk ?

By Mitchell Beer

(First of a two-part series)

This fall's influenza season will almost certainly bring a serious outbreak of **H1N1**, the novel virus also known as swine flu. But as the autumn months approach, the worst flu pandemic in nearly a century is being heralded by an outbreak of doubt and dismissiveness that could be almost as serious. And our industry is not immune.

In mid-August, U.S. Cabinet secretaries Kathleen Sebelius, Gary Locke, and Janet Napolitano announced that employers would be asked to consider limiting face-to-face meetings and travel as one of a series of measures to minimize H1N1's spread. In some industry circles, the statement was interpreted as the government's latest attack on meetings.

Last week, Chile confirmed a case in which H1N1 had spread to turkeys. "What does this mean for us?" wrote MaryAnne Bobrow, a veteran independent planner whose clientele includes a nonprofit veterinary association. "The mutation is unpredictable, all the way from 'so what' to deadly." At least one meeting industry colleague responded that the turkeys themselves had planted the story in time to survive the Thanksgiving season.

This is a horrifying response to a global pandemic that could infect 30 percent to 50 percent of the American population, hospitalize up to 1.8 million people, and kill 30,000 to 90,000 in the U.S. alone, according to a recent presidential panel report. The attitude is inexcusable, even in jest, in a profession that takes pride in its ability to keep hundreds or thousands of people alive, safe, and productive while they're attending live events.

Last spring, Nelson Fabian, executive director of the Denver-based National Environmental Health Association wrote a guest post for our company blog that brought readers to the front lines of the response to H1N1 as a public health issue. Over the phone last week, he identified three levels of preparedness for health emergencies—individual, business, and community. While the response from hospitals and other government agencies has received the widest coverage, he sees individual preparedness as the foundation on which the entire system will stand or fall.

"In reality, if people aren't prepared, you'll have this mass avalanche on local facilities," from schools and government services to pharmacies and grocery stores, he said. "If we can get to people, make them aware without scaring them, then we give the system time to adjust and rebalance, even at a compromised level."



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NEHA helps its employees keep up with the latest news on H1N1, makes hand sanitizers available at the office, and encourages staff to get flu shots and build up small reserves of food supplies at home. Everyone is set up to work from home if necessary, and the entire team is familiar with social distancing strategies of the sort that Cabinet secretaries Sebelius, Locke, and Napolitano recommended in their news conference.

"It's foolish to have an issue with this potential seriousness and pretend it doesn't exist," Fabian said. "I'm in the meetings industry, for crying out loud. I have to be aware that my meeting this coming year may not be everything I thought it would be, so that I don't become overly dependent on numbers that may not materialize. In that way, I protect my business."

For hotels or CVBs that rely heavily on meeting revenue, Fabian said it's even more important to keep eyes wide open.

"If an organization is dependent on meetings for a living and they're oblivious to this threat, they could get the rug pulled out from under them, and they'll be in all kinds of hurt if they've done no preparation. If I thought I might be shocked by an event that would cost me 50 percent of my revenue, I would much rather have some warning."

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