Flu Lessons Hit Home

About this time last month, my wife Linda and I had just settled into our seats on an airliner preparing to take off from Hawaii, when the cell phone in my pocket vibrated ominously. A text message informed me that the lady who had been watching our home and pets was in the hospital after falling suddenly and seriously ill. Soon after our arrival in Denver, we visited her in a darkened hospital room, where we found a team of dedicated health care professionals doing everything they could to save the life of our otherwise healthy, 42-year-old house sitter. Diagnosis: Influenza.

A few days later, at about 10:30 in the morning, my cell phone vibrated again. This time, it was my daughter Anne Marie calling from Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, where she and some college friends were spending Spring Break. She said that she was feeling very sick and could not get in touch with the doctor recommended by the manager of the condo where the group was staying. I told her to pack her bag as quickly as possible, and take a taxi to the airport. David Clarke of Outrigger International Travel did his magic and booked the last available seat on the 1:30 p.m. flight to Denver for Anne Marie. By 6 p.m. my very weak, but grateful, daughter was being examined and treated by a physician in an urgent care clinic near our home. She spent the next several days in bed. Diagnosis: Influenza.

Our house sitter and Anne Marie were like many other unfortunates this flu season in that they had failed to make the time to receive flu shots last fall.

Influenza, more commonly known as flu, is an infectious disease of birds and mammals caused by RNA viruses; it is one of the oldest and most common diseases. Symptoms include bronchitis, pneumonia, muscle aches, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Each winter, the flu virus re-emerges from a seasonal hiatus and spreads with varying tenacity. In some years, the strain that emerges is comparatively mild, and relatively few people get sick. Other years, it is highly virulent, spreading rapidly and killing many, particularly young children and senior citizens. In today’s interconnected world, travelers can quickly transport the virus, rapidly exacerbating a local outbreak into a global epidemic. Travel industry workers who greet guests from all over the world each day are more likely to be exposed to the virus and are thus at greater risk of catching the flu.

Many people do not appreciate the danger that influenza poses as a major cause of death in our nation. Flu is estimated to be the cause of over 200,000 hospitalizations each year. It kills an average of 36,000 people per year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). To put that number into perspective, consider that motor vehicles kill about 43,000, and firearms cause about 29,000 deaths annually.

Flu viruses are constantly mutating, and different strains of the virus frequently emerge, making it difficult for researchers to develop a vaccine that will prevent or control flu. Epidemiologists are continually studying trends in the current flu season to predict the strains that might cause disease in the following months. Annually, a vaccine is designed to cover these predictions, but nature has a record of fooling even the brightest scientists. For example, the vaccine designed last year for the 2007 - 2008 flu season covered only about 40 percent of the viruses that actually emerged and caused disease.

The CDC reports that both the severity and number of flu cases this season have been above normal. Hospitals in the Denver area are unusually jammed, and hospital administrators implicate the rise in flu cases as a primary cause. My sister-in-law, a nurse in Columbus, Ohio, knows of two flu victims in her area, aged 17 and 25 years, who died, despite being in otherwise perfect health.

My reason for detailing all of this for readers of Saturday Briefing is to urge you to be cautious even though the 2007 – 2008 flu season is coming to an end.

- Flu shot vaccines are still available through May and the CDC advises vaccination.
- If you do come down with flu-like symptoms, seek medical attention immediately. With improved technology and procedures, healthcare centers diagnose flu with fairly good accuracy and, if indicated, will promptly start treatment with appropriate anti-viral and symptomatic medications.

And when the vaccine for the 2008 – 2009 flu season becomes available, be sure to get vaccinated once again. Having experienced the real flu this year, I’ll bet that my daughter Anne Marie will be the first in line.