“The Great Swine Flu Panic?”
Too Early to Tell
By Dr. Richard Kelley

My personal experience with the flu dates back about 50 years when I was a young medical student in Boston and had the opportunity to work in several hospitals around town. Some of the patients I treated told me about surviving the 1918 “Spanish flu” in their youth. That pandemic traveled around the world for about two years, and cases were reported even in the Arctic and remote Pacific islands. It was a particularly virulent mutation of the influenza virus and killed anywhere from 20 to 100 million people around the world.

Given that personal history and the fact that there are typically some 36,000 flu deaths in the U.S. and seven or eight times that number around the globe every year, I have always approached influenza with a great deal of respect, and I am pleased that our Crisis Team is doing likewise.

So far, there have been relatively few swine flu cases and deaths. Some feel that the media have overblown the situation. One critic calls it “The Great Swine Flu Panic.” That may be true, but we are early in the game and caution is warranted.

My sister-in-law, Janie Van Gilder, RN, has worked for the state of Ohio for several years to prepare that state for a pandemic. I spoke with her this week, and she offered a couple of interesting observations and suggestions.

1. The availability of the 2008-2009 seasonal flu vaccine ends this month. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said this vaccine won’t likely stop the swine flu virus.
2. You do not need to take pork off your luau menu. Cooked pork is not known to transmit the “swine flu” virus. According to news reports, they’re slaughtering all the pigs in Egypt, but that is totally unnecessary.
3. Mind your personal hygiene carefully. Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly. Avoid close contact with crowds.
4. While we in the Pacific have been known for expressions of warm hospitality including hugs and kisses on the cheek, perhaps right now those should be avoided.

In the Midwest, they are turning to the “knuckle-bump” as an expression of greeting and friendship. According to Time magazine, the knuckle-bump evolved out of the “high-five” palm touching in NBA during the 1970s. The knuckle-bump was given a boost last summer when Barack and Michelle Obama celebrated Barack’s nomination for president by touching their fists on stage in St. Paul, Minnesota, before millions of TV viewers around the globe.

Thanks to everyone for their dedication and hard work in these difficult times.

Peril or Panic?
Pandemic in the Digital Information Age
By Dr. Chuck Kelley

(Dr. Richard Kelley has invited guest columnist Dr. Chuck Kelley to write this week’s lead article, which is about swine flu. Dr. Richard Kelley has contributed some additional perspectives in a separate article on page 12.)

By now, everyone knows we are facing a rapidly-spreading outbreak – a potentially serious epidemic – of swine flu, the H1N1 strain of influenza. By the time this article reaches readers, the outbreak may have become a pandemic (a world-wide epidemic). This is terrible news for our business and for all humankind.

Rather than attempt to review all the details, which are widely available online and in the media, let me point out some of the unique aspects of the current situation.

A few decades ago, when Dr. Richard Kelley was working as a physician, news of a new disease outbreak would remain local for quite some time. It took weeks for detailed, accurate information to work its way through the medical community, then into newsrooms, through the writing, editing, filming, printing, and distribution process, and finally, into the hands of the general public.
More recently, when I was in medical practice, the flow of information had speeded up quite a bit, but nowhere near the pace of today. Although a few physicians were already “online” with the Internet, the medical community generally relied on faxes to distribute alerts. Because most learning continued to take place in medical conferences, it still took weeks for information to be disseminated.

Today, thanks to the Internet and millions of networked computers, the world, of communication and information sharing is dramatically different. However, it’s worth asking if this gives us an advantage in dealing with a potential peril or if 24-hour, wall-to-wall coverage is causing unnecessary panic.

Like most people, I woke up Monday morning to find “Swine Flu” plastered on the front page of every major newspaper. Then I turned on the television and found it the lead story on every news station. On the way to work, I heard the story all over AM and FM radio. Once in the office, I turned on my computer and began to dig deeper.

First I went to the Internet and reviewed the basic facts:

- The so-called swine flu is a mutant strain of the influenza virus. In a normal year, the flu kills about 36,000 Americans and 250,000 to 300,000 people worldwide.
- Various forms of the influenza virus normally live in a wide range of animals, including birds and pigs (swine), but these viruses can mutate (evolve into new strains), attack humans, and then sometimes be transmitted between humans.
- Sometimes a mutant influenza virus can cause pandemics. For example, in 1976 and 1988, there were similar epidemic concerns in the United States.
- The current influenza virus outbreak started in Mexico a couple of weeks ago and has rapidly spread to the United States and more distant countries, causing concerns about a global pandemic.
- There is no vaccine available yet for this mutant virus.

As I write this article, Web sites such as those of the World Health Organization (www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov/swineflu), the CDC, are being updated minute by minute. They allow you to watch the spread of disease in “real time.”

I was astonished and pleased to find that the CDC, being at the forefront of modern communications, had teamed up with Twitter and was “tweeting” swine flu messages to computers, cell phones, and PDAs (personal digital assistants) all around the world (http://twitter.com/cdcemergency).

After I had reviewed the basic facts and was up-to-date on the current situation, it was time to find out more about the potential effects on the hospitality industry, in general, and our company, in particular.

First I visited the American Hotel & Lodging Association website (www.ahla.com/content.aspx?id=27290), which already had a swine flu page with pertinent information, links, and advice for hotels and motels. It provided valuable information, especially about proper hand washing and personal hygiene, which our team could download and use immediately.

Next, I contacted Bill Peters in our Denver Reservations office. I asked if he had detected a change in our future bookings or an increase in cancellations. Using his electronic database, he was quickly able to answer “no” – there had been no increase in cancellations. Then he was able to put into place an electronic monitoring system to track the situation from now on. Beginning then, he would be e-mailing me timely updates on cancellations.

Then I began to scan all the hospitality industry news blogs for pertinent, up-to-the-minute information. I found that West Coast tour operators were responding to the travel advisories and electronically moving their customers from Mexico to other destinations. I worried that other travel advisories could shut off our business as well. I read that cruise ships with Mexican ports of call were changing their itineraries. There was also concern that Japan might issue travel advisories against the United States. If this happened, we could be devastated. I learned that airlines, hotels, cruise ships, and tour wholesalers were responding generously by allowing customers to change bookings without re-booking fees. Tidbits of information flowed into the computer all morning.

By mid-morning, the Outrigger Crisis Team already had enough information from multiple sources around the world to accurately assess the situation and come up with a plan. The Crisis Team always stands ready to respond to all types of emergencies and has many pre-planned responses in our Crisis Manual (which is available electronically).

A couple of years ago when bird flu and SARS were threatening, our Crisis Team created the outline of a “Pandemic Plan,” which was quite appropriate for the current situation. We were able “dust it off,” update, and adapt it as appropriate, and ready it for distribution. We also reviewed the facts everyone had collected that morning and created a “What You Should Know About Swine Flu” document to get a simple, coherent message out to our entire company.
WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SWINE FLU  
Updated April 30, 2009

1. Although Hawaii has not yet seen any cases of infection by the new mutant influenza virus (called “swine flu” by many) in the Hawaiian Islands, Outrigger is taking the threat of an outbreak seriously.  

2. The company’s Crisis Team has been activated. We have a pandemic policy in place, and we are taking advantage of the great information streaming to us from our local Department of Health, the CDC, the American Hotel & Lodging Association, and other outstanding organizations.  

3. What specific actions we take, if any, will depend upon how the situation unfolds and guidance from government agencies.  

4. So far, we have not seen any unusual pattern in hotel reservation cancellations, but we will continue to monitor the situation very closely.  

5. Should we become aware of any guest or employee who has swine flu, we will contact the Department of Health immediately and follow their instructions.  

6. As is our normal policy, we are continuing to encourage good housekeeping and personal hygiene procedures with all of our employees, such as covering your mouth with a tissue when you sneeze, frequent hand washing, using hand sanitizers, and appropriate use of sick leave.  

7. No travel warning has been issued by any authority restricting or advising against travel to Hawaii or the United States. We remain open for business and warmly welcome visitors to our shores, and to the Outrigger family of hotels.  

8. The current influenza outbreak is another blow to our economy, which is already suffering greatly. If the situation continues to develop, we can expect to see a dramatic decrease in travelers and of course, more decreases in revenue and job opportunity in our state.  

   It was a hectic morning to say the least. But thanks to the immediate availability of online information, there was no panic and, by lunch time on Monday, the same day the news broke, we had been able to obtain all the information we needed, coordinate our response with major government agencies, find out what our customers, suppliers, and competitors were doing, assess the immediate impact on our business, update our contingency procedures, and communicate with our entire team. All of this was made possible with the wonderful tools of the digital information age.