Flu Season Coming – Is a Pandemic Possible?

As we enter September and fall begins, we also move into the flu season. I urge everyone in our extended ‘ohana to be aware of the dangers and take the steps needed to protect themselves and their families from the flu. I also hope everyone will take the time to learn about the potential for a worldwide flu pandemic. That possibility has huge implications, particularly for the Travel & Tourism industry.

Flu is a slang name for influenza, one of the oldest and most common diseases known. It is a viral illness that can produce many symptoms, including bronchitis, pneumonia, muscle aches, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. (For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/flu.)

Each winter, the flu virus re-emerges and spreads. 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 world, travelers can quickly transport the virus, rapidly changing a local outbreak into a global event. 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.

The most serious flu outbreak in history was the “Spanish Flu” of 1918-20. It quickly spread from Europe to the rest of the world, even to the Arctic and remote Pacific islands. There was a high mortality rate, and it killed, not only young children and senior citizens, but also many, many young adults, aged 20 to 40. The global death toll is estimated at between 40 and 50 million.

In my early days of medical training and practice, I spoke to a number of Spanish Flu survivors. I still remember their descriptions of those horrible times.

More recent outbreaks, the “Asian Flu” (1957-58) and the “Hong Kong Flu” (1968-69), each killed about a million people. Many experts believe we are due for another serious worldwide outbreak or “pandemic.”

The World Health Organization (WHO) carefully tracks flu cases in every country, and the most recent data shows that since 2003, the “H5N1” strain of bird flu has infected 322 people and killed 195 – nearly two out of three! Health experts are now quite concerned that we are on the brink of a new flu outbreak of pandemic proportions. This might happen if an existing strain of bird flu, such as H5N1, adapts and becomes highly contagious between humans. (So far, it is highly contagious only between birds and is only occasionally transmitted from birds to people who live and work closely with poultry.)

A study of an outbreak in a family in Indonesia this past April suggests that the bird (or avian) influenza virus did spread from human to human. A 37-year old woman appears to have infected her 10-year old nephew who then infected his father. If confirmed, that would be the first documented case of human-to-human transmission of bird flu. And that is what health professionals fear most, because the bird flu virus is so deadly. It appears that the stage is set for another flu pandemic. (More bird flu information can be found at www.cdc.gov/flu/avian.)

The possibility of a flu pandemic was discussed at last week’s security summit when the leaders of Canada, the U.S., and Mexico met at Montebello, Quebec. They unveiled a North American Pandemic Influenza Plan designed to share expertise, coordinate public health messages, and overcome anticipated obstacles at national borders, according to the University of Michigan’s Center for Infectious Disease Research & Policy.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has spent $5.6 billion in the past five years preparing for a possible flu pandemic. It is stockpiling vaccines and antiviral drugs, and it is helping states and communities prepare for the possibility of a pandemic with education and financial support.

Hawaii has received $803,669 in “phase-one” funding from HHS to use for pandemic planning activities. Hawaii will also receive an additional $1,333,955 from the revised “phase two” of HHS’ local and state allocations. (See www.hhs.gov/flu for detailed information.)

A special section of pandemic information for the Travel & Tourism industry can be found at www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/travelchecklist.html.

Every year we offer free flu shots to our ‘ohana at our annual Outrigger/OHANA Health Fair. Unless you are medically unable to do so, we highly recommend getting the flu shot. This simple shot provides substantial protection against the flu, although not necessarily against the bird flu (other vaccines are being prepared for that, and they are not generally available at this point).

- Those working on Oahu can attend the Outrigger/OHANA Health Fair, September 25 or 27. Free flu shots will be available during certain hours. If you miss the Health Fair, present your employee ID card at the Waikiki offices of Doctors On Call for a free flu shot while vaccine supplies last.

- Those working in other locations across the Pacific should contact their Director of Human Resources for information on the availability of flu shots in their area.

This is serious business. “Just do it.”