Influenza is Dangerous – Get Your Annual Flu Shots Now

As fall begins, we move once again into 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. In particular, I strongly recommend flu shots. I also hope everyone will take the time to learn about the potential for a flu pandemic, or worldwide outbreak. That possibility has huge implications, particularly for the Travel & Tourism industry.

Flu is a slang name for seasonal influenza, one of the oldest and most common diseases known. It is a viral illness that can produce many symptoms, including fever, cough, chills, and muscle aches. Some people may also experience nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Bronchitis and pneumonia, both potentially very serious, can easily develop as secondary infections. (For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/flu/.)

Each winter, the seasonal flu virus re-emerges, usually as a newly-mutated or evolved strain, and spreads. Some years, the new strain 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 transforming a local outbreak into a global event. Travel industry workers who greet guests from all over the world each day are more likely than others 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. This pandemic was very deadly, killing, not only young children and senior citizens, but also many, many people in the prime of life. 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 global flu 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 pandemic. Experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) say it’s not a matter of IF a flu pandemic will happen, but WHEN.

There is also the issue of Avian Influenza or “Bird Flu.” Viruses are normally found in wild birds, helping them digest their food, but these viruses can change or mutate and make the birds sick. When these sick birds come in contact with domestic poultry, the results are deadly. And when these mutated avian viruses are transmitted from birds to humans, they have proven highly lethal. 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 387 people and killed 245 – nearly two out of three!

So far, Bird Flu is highly contagious only between birds and is rarely transmitted from birds to people – and then, as far as is known, only to those who live and work closely with poultry. However, if a strain of Bird Flu, such as H5N1, should mutate or evolve in a way that makes it highly contagious between humans, we could have a worldwide pandemic equal to or greater than the Spanish Flu.

There is no current human vaccine for H5N1 because the virus must first mutate to become easily transmitted from human to human for scientists to develop a vaccine for it. However, we can and should take steps to protect ourselves and our families against the effects of ordinary seasonal flu.

Teresa C. Long, M.D., Public Health Commissioner for Columbus, Ohio, writes, “We have every reason to believe that the 2008-2009 flu season will be like the previous ones. Typically, 20 percent of the population gets influenza, resulting in more than 200,000 hospitalizations and 36,000 deaths every year (in the United States) – more than any other vaccine-preventable disease.”

Dr. Long adds, “The flu can quickly spread through a workplace, virtually shutting down small businesses or even entire departments of large organizations.”

Flu shots offer excellent, although not perfect, resistance to seasonal flu. The vaccine consists of three killed flu viruses – two from the influenza A family and one from influenza B. The components are updated each year, as influenza viruses circulating the world evolve.

There are many benefits from receiving a flu shot every year. Not only do you protect yourself against the current year’s strains of influenza, but there is evidence that the immunity builds up over the years. There is also evidence that seasonal flu vaccination may provide cross-protection for pandemic flu, including partial immunity to the deadly H5N1 Bird Flu virus.

I urge everyone to get an annual seasonal flu shot soon.

This year, we again offered free flu shots to our ‘ohana at our annual Outrigger/OHANA Health Fair in Waikiki. Many
took advantage of that opportunity, but there are many more who still need the vaccine before our ‘ohana is protected.

Flu shots are still available in Waikiki through the offices of Doctors On Call in the Sheraton Princess Kaiulani Hotel. Present your employee ID card, and your shot is free while vaccine supplies last.

Employees enrolled with HMSA or Kaiser may visit their Primary Care Physician for a flu shot, and 100 percent of eligible charges should be covered. If you are enrolled in a family plan, it should also cover flu shots for your spouse and/or children. Safeway Pharmacies, Longs, and Walgreens also offer flu shots for $30. (Walgreens, however, offers this service in Colorado but not Hawaii.) If you have coverage through HMSA or Medicare Part B, your annual flu shot is free from Safeway, Longs, Walgreens, or other authorized providers. (For those without such coverage who pay the $30 charge, at Safeway, the pharmacy will give you a coupon worth 10 percent off your next grocery purchase.)

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.

Don’t delay. This is serious business. “Just do it.”