This flu season could be the worst in years

BY DR. RICHARD KELLEY

I am concerned that over the past few weeks, many of us may have missed the important news that the United States and other Northern Hemisphere countries, including Europe and most of Asia, may be heading for one of the worst flu seasons in years.

That is the conclusion of William Quirk and Alexander Nowak at the U.S.-based financial firm Piper Jaffray. They noted that the number of flu cases in Australia and New Zealand increased massively this year.

“The Southern Hemisphere just went through one of the worst seasons on record (despite the vaccine targeting the correct strains),” wrote Quirk and Nowak in a note to clients, a summary of which was published in Business Insider magazine. The total number of influenza-like illness (ILI) cases was up 45 percent over the previous year, the worst increase since 2009. Studies over the years have shown the flu season in New Zealand to be a great predictor of what will happen in the U.S.

As winter shifts to the Northern Hemisphere from October through next April, extrapolating the Southern Hemisphere numbers suggests the U.S. might have nearly a million cases of ILI, the worst since the H1N1 flu pandemic in 2009. The U.S. reported 715,031 ILI cases in 2014. The only other year in the last decade that there were over 700,000 cases was in the pandemic year of 2009, reported Business Insider writer Bob Bryan.

I am particularly alert to the dangers of a virulent flu pandemic because when I was training in medicine in Boston in the late 1950s, I spoke with many elderly people who lived through and remembered the 1918 influenza pandemic. Called the Spanish flu, it killed somewhere between 50 and 100 million people – 3-5 percent of the world's population at the time – making it one of the world's worst-ever medical disasters. The stories that many of these survivors told me were shocking.

More recently, from the 1976–1977 flu season to the 2006–2007 season, annual flu-related deaths in the U.S. have ranged from a low of about 3,000 to a high of about 49,000, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Worldwide, each year the flu kills about 250,000 to 500,000 – a quarter to half a million people. This disease should never be confused with the common cold, some of whose symptoms it shares. The flu is far more serious. It's deadly.

Influenza viruses are always mutating (that is, evolving into new strains), so scientists have to work hard to develop a vaccine that will match the viruses considered most likely to cause the flu each year. It is always a high-stakes guessing game.

The issue in today's world is how rapidly air travel can move flu viruses around the globe. The concept is dramatically illustrated in an eight-minute TED-Ed animated video by Mark Honigsbaum (http://goo.gl/ONQnA). I urge everyone in Travel & Tourism to watch this video, as it quickly and dramatically shows how the 2003 SARS virus was spread to 29 countries in four months with deadly results.

Flu shots are especially important to people who work in Travel & Tourism. Because travelers can carry the influenza virus thousands of miles in only a few hours, travel industry employees who greet guests from all over the world are at high risk of catching and spreading the flu.

Also check out the TED talk by Laurie Garrett for a more detailed discussion of influenza and how it can spread. (https://goo.gl/fHHkFN)

Again, I urge everyone to get their flu shots as soon as possible. Don't delay. This is serious business and if the analysis of William Quirk and Alexander Nowak is correct, this could be a very bad year.

Flu shots are vital! I got mine.

Dr. Richard Kelley
**Where to get your flu shot**

During Outrigger’s recent annual Wellness Fair, flu shots were offered to members of our Waikīkī ‘ohana. If you missed the Fair, here are steps you may take, depending on your health plan:

**HMSA PPP** - Visit Doctors on Call in Waikīkī for a free flu shot – just bring your medical card, a government-issued photo ID and your Outrigger ID, or visit a participating pharmacy. On O‘ahu and most neighbor islands, these include Longs, Walgreens, Safeway pharmacies and Foodland pharmacies. For a complete list, please contact your HR representative.

**HMSA HPH** - See your physician or health center.

**KAISER** - Contact your Kaiser physician or clinic.

The cost of the immunization is processed through the participant’s medical coverage, so there is generally no charge to our employees/hosts.

Members of our ‘ohana working in other locations should contact their supervisor for flu shot information.