Influenza is Still Very Dangerous:
Get Your Flu Shot Now!
By Dr. Richard Kelley

Earlier this week, Dr. Chuck Kelley was returning from a business trip to Asia. Halfway into a nine-hour flight, he suddenly began to feel very ill. Fortunately he made it home quickly where he crawled right into bed and spent the next four days recovering. We will never know exactly what he caught, the “flu” (influenza) or something similar, but throughout the ordeal Chuck was feeling very thankful that he had taken the time to get his company-sponsored annual flu shot. If that had not been the case, he might have had a far more serious illness that could have required hospitalization. A full-blown case of the flu might even have put his life in danger. Dr. Chuck’s illness is an important reminder to us all that we are entering the flu season, which can be very dangerous and potentially deadly.

I urge everyone in our ‘ohana, no matter where you are located – in our Colorado reservations center or in one of our operations scattered across the Pacific and Indian Oceans from Hawaii to Guam, Fiji, Australia, Indonesia, Thailand or Mauritius – to be aware of the dangers of flu and take steps to protect yourselves and your families from this disease.

I particularly recommend the flu shot (immunization) – I got mine this week.

Influenza viruses are always mutating (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 guessing game.

Many of you may recall 2009 when the A/H1N1 strain of influenza, also known as “swine flu,” suddenly caused a pandemic (global outbreak), the first in more than 40 years. As a result, that year people needed two flu shots – one for the regular “seasonal” flu and a second one against the particularly dangerous A/H1N1.

Concern about the flu was heightened this week as China reported its second case of A/H7N9 avian flu. This is a very severe form of the disease that has been fatal in one-third of the total worldwide count of 137 cases, according to Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. While this is far from a pandemic, it must be closely watched.

The 2013-2014 flu vaccine is now available, and only one injection is needed. Most people will receive what is called a “trivalent” vaccine that offers protection against two influenza A viruses and one influenza B virus.

A new “quadrivalent” vaccine protecting against two influenza A and two influenza B viruses was briefly available in very limited supply and, according to a Walgreens pharmacist in Denver I contacted, is no longer generally available. KARE Channel 11 in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn., reported this week that only 30 million doses of the total of 135–140 million doses of vaccine produced in the U.S. were quadrivalent vaccines. Perhaps a quadrivalent vaccine will become the standard and be widely available in years to come.

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

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Influenza ...

**HMSA PPP**
You may visit Doctors On Call in Waikīkī for a free flu shot – just bring your Outrigger I.D. You may also visit a participating retail store. On O'ahu and most Neighbor Islands, these include Longs, Walgreens, Safeway pharmacies and Foodland pharmacies. For a complete listing, please contact your HR representative.

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

**Kaiser**
Contact your Kaiser physician or hospital.

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

Flu shots are especially important to people who work in Travel & Tourism. Travelers can carry the influenza virus thousands of miles in only a few hours, rapidly turning a local outbreak into a global event. Travel industry workers who greet guests from all over the world are thus at greater risk of catching and spreading the flu.

I urge everyone to get their flu shots as soon as possible. Please don’t delay. This is serious business. “Just do it.”

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**Flu Facts**

Let’s look at some key facts about the flu:

**What is influenza (also called flu)?**
The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness and can sometimes even lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccination each year.

**Signs and symptoms of flu**
People who have the flu often feel some or all of these signs and symptoms:
- Fever or feeling feverish/chills (but not everyone ill with the flu will have a fever)
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue (very tired)

Some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults.

**How flu spreads**
Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly through tiny droplets propelled into the air when people ill with the flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. Less often, a person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, eyes or nose.

Washing your hands frequently with soap and warm water can help keep you safe from the flu.

**Period of contagiousness**
You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else even before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. Some people, especially young children and people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others for an even longer time.

**How serious is the flu?**
Flu is unpredictable and its severity can vary widely from one season to the next depending on many things, including:
- which flu viruses are spreading,
- how much flu vaccine is available,
- when vaccine is available,
- how many people get vaccinated, and
- how well the flu vaccine is matched to the flu viruses that are spreading.

Flu seasons are unpredictable and can be severe, even deadly. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that, over a period of 31 years, from the 1976-1977 season to the 2006-2007 season, estimates of annual flu-associated deaths in the United States ranged from a low of about 3,000 to a high of about 49,000 people. The generally accepted average is 36,000 flu-associated deaths in the U.S. each year.

To put this into perspective, consider that automobile accidents killed nearly 33,000 people annually in the U.S. in 2009, 2010 and 2012.

Each winter, the seasonal flu virus re-emerges and spreads, usually as a newly mutated or evolved strain. Some years, the new strain is comparatively mild, and relatively few people get sick. In other years, it is highly virulent, spreading rapidly and killing many, particularly young children and senior citizens. There is a wealth of information on seasonal flu available at [www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/keyfacts.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/keyfacts.htm).

Seasonal flu shots offer excellent, although not complete, resistance to the disease. They not only protect us from the current year’s flu, there is evidence that they also strengthen our immunity over the years. Get your flu shot and LiveWell!