

California Nurses Report Inadequate Health and Safety Protection During the Current H1N1 Influenza Outbreak

A Report from the SEIU Nurse Alliance
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Introduction

The ongoing outbreak of H1N1 flu continues to expand in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) expects that more cases, more hospitalizations and more deaths from this outbreak will occur over the coming days and weeks. The current outbreak was first reported on April 23 with the first human cases identified in San Diego County and Imperial County, California as well as in San Antonio, Texas (1).

From the beginning of the outbreak, the CDC and state and local health departments have provided inconsistent guidance to healthcare employers and employees regarding infection control procedures to protect the health of workers at risk of H1N1 flu exposure at their facilities. This inconsistent guidance has raised concerns about the occupational health protections actually being provided to healthcare workers during the current H1N1 flu outbreak.

To gather a snapshot of what occupational health protections are actually being provided to healthcare workers during the early days of the current outbreak, nurse leaders were surveyed from the SEIU Nurse Alliance of California, an affiliate of the SEIU National Nurse Alliance. The SEIU Nurse Alliance unites 85,000 registered nurses in the United States and is a part of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) which represents one million health care workers across the nation. The SEIU Nurse Alliance of California unites registered nurses from both public and private sector health systems in California (2).

Conducting the Survey

An existing pandemic flu preparedness survey instrument was modified to gather information on current worker health and safety protections from the H1N1 flu provided by employers at healthcare facilities (3). The survey was distributed to frontline nurse leaders from across California. The nurse leaders completing the survey were all working nurses, most also serving as shop stewards and safety and health committee members for their local unions at their facilities. Surveys from sixteen healthcare facilities were completed. The majority of surveys were obtained from hospitals (81% percent). Completed surveys covered a minimum of 19,200 healthcare employees.

Results

Overall Staff Protection

Alarming, almost all respondents (92%) “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with the statement that the facility is adequately protecting its staff during this H1N1 outbreak, None of the respondents “strongly agreed” and only one “agreed” with the statement.

Number of H1N1 Cases Reported

Respondents reported at least 14 confirmed, probable or suspect cases of H1N1 had been identified at the facilities. The number of total cases is likely to be higher given that half of the respondents reported they did not know. Given these numbers, it is alarming that at only one in four facilities did respondents report knowing that staff expected to have exposure to the H1N1 flu patients have been identified. Similarly, no respondent reported being aware the facility has put in place protocols to protect workers engaged in high risk procedures with suspected or known H1N1 flu patients?

Staff Training and Familiarity with H1N1 Infection Control Plans and Critical Policies

No respondents reported staff being familiar with the infection controls plans for H1N1 at their facilities. Only one respondent reported the facility has provided worker health and safety training to staff on H1N1 flu. Several respondents wrote in that facilities are providing general information on the H1N1 outbreak (not worker health and safety information) primarily through emails, facility websites or links to the CDC H1N1 website.

None of the respondents reported being aware that facilities have in place critical policies covering issues such as absenteeism of sick leave, absenteeism, family leave and workers compensation, related to H1N1.

Respiratory Protection

Respondents report that only 20% of facilities do not have respirators readily available. However, only about half of respondents report being properly fit tested to wear a respirator in the past 12 months.

Reporting For Work

According to respondents, all or most staffs appear to be continuing to reporting for work during the current outbreak of H1N1 flu. Earlier surveys on pandemic flu preparedness found that a substantial majority of healthcare workers might stay home if they believe that their employers occupational health protection were inadequate to protect them and their families from a pandemic flu (4)(5)(6). However, the outbreak is in its first two weeks and much uncertainty exists and healthcare workers have not yet been reported becoming infected by H1N1.

Key Survey Results

Total Number of California Healthcare Facilities Surveyed on May 6, 2009	16
Minimum Number of Employees Covered by Survey:	19,200
Healthcare Facility Types Surveyed <i>Facilities from north, central and southern California in urban and rural locations</i>	13 Hospitals 1 Public health facility 1 Long-term care facility 1 Outpatient clinics
Number of Cases of H1N1 Flu Reported from these Facilities <i>Half of Facilities (8) reported Don't Know</i>	Confirmed cases - 2 to 4 Probable cases - 4 to 7 Suspect cases - 8 to 14 Total cases - 14 to 25
Responses to Key Questions	
This facility is adequately protecting its staff during this H1N1 outbreak	Strongly Agree - 0% (0/15) Agree - 7% (1/15) Disagree - 46% (7/15) Strongly Disagree - 46% (7/15)
Are staff familiar with the facilities H1N1 flu infection control plan?	Yes - 0% (0/16) No - 81% (13/16) Don't know - 19% (3/16)
Has the facility identified staff expected to have possible exposure to H1N1 flu?	Yes - 24% (4/16) No - 75% (12/16)
Has the facility put in place protocols to protect workers engaged in high risk procedures with suspected or known H1N1 flu patients?	Yes - 0% (5/15) No - 33% (5/15) Don't know - 66% (5/15)
Has the facility provided worker health and safety training to staff on H1N1 flu?	Yes - 6% (1/16) No - 44% (7/16) Don't know - 50% (8/16)
Are respirators readily available?	Yes - 53% (8/15) No - 20% (3/15) Don't know - 27% (4/15)
Have you been properly fit tested to wear a respirator in the past 12 months?	Yes - 55% (6/11) No - 45% (5/11)
Do facilities have critical policies covering issues such as sick leave, absenteeism, family leave and workers compensation, related to H1N1?	Yes - 0% (0/16) No - 44% (7/16) Don't know - 56% (9/16)
Are staffs reporting for work during the current outbreak of H1N1 flu?	All are reporting - 38% (6/16) Most are reporting - 25% (4/16) Less than 50% reporting - 0% (0/16) Don't know - 38% (6/16)

Discussion

The results of this limited survey indicate that many healthcare facilities in California appear to not be providing adequate health and safety protections to healthcare workers during the ongoing H1N1 flu outbreak.

The April 2009 report, *Healthcare Workers In Peril: Preparing To Protect Worker Health And Safety During Pandemic Influenza, A Union Survey Report*, indicated a widespread lack of preparedness regarding occupational health and safety needs to protect healthcare workers during a pandemic flu (2). This survey largely confirms the results of that earlier survey, essentially in real time with a pandemic at our door.

The April 2009 report recommended nine actions to address the problems of protecting healthcare workers identified in that report, including a comprehensive mandatory OSHA standard to address airborne transmissible disease, rather than recommendations and guidelines and a means to assure that all healthcare facilities are covered by such an OSHA standard (2).

References:

1. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) H1N1 Flu website <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>, accessed May 6, 2009.
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3. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) website <http://www.seiu.org/a/ourunion/a-closer-look-inside-labors-fastest-growing-union.php>, accessed May 6, 2009.
4. Balicer RD, Omer SB, Barnett DJ, Everly GS. Local public health workers' perceptions toward responding to an influenza pandemic. *BMC Publ Health* 6:99, 2006.
5. Irvin CB, Cindrich L, Patterson W, Southall. Survey of hospital healthcare personnel response during a potential avian influenza pandemic: will they come to work? *Prehospital Disast Med* 23(4):328, 2008.
6. Qureshi KA, Gershon RRM, Staub T, Sherman MF, Gebbie E, McCollum M, Erwin MJ, Morse SS. Healthcare workers' ability and willingness to report to duty during catastrophic disasters. *Journal of Urban Health*, 82(3):378, 2005.

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