One Flu Over the Piggy's Nest

By ACSH Staff — April 28, 2009

This piece first appeared on the Wall Street Journal's site OpinionJournal.com.

The news is a-chatter about swine flu. Is a pandemic pending—where all of us are at risk of disease and death? There are more questions than answers right now. Here are a few of them:

¢What in heaven's name do muddled headlines like this one, based on government comments, really mean: "U.S. Declares Swine Flu Is 'Public Health Emergency,' a Term That Does Not Signal a Greater Threat."

Hard to tell from that if there is an emergency or not. The public may not realize that government "emergency" terminology is partly a function of disaster preparedness rules—calling an event an official "emergency" triggers, for example, increased availability of stockpiles of medicines—like preparing for a hurricane when you are unsure it will actually happen. Still, government should take care not to send mixed messages.

¢Why is the influenza in Mexico more virulent than the cases here?

The cases reported in the U.S. are much milder and less life-threatening—but this could be an artifact of inconsistent reporting.

¢Will the antivirals like Tamiflu be effective against the current strain of swine flu?

Data show that Tamiflu was basically useless against this current season's variety of influenza—but public health officials remain optimistic that a spectrum of antivirals now available will work.

¢Will this year's regular flu shots protect us from the current strain of swine flu?

No—the current virus is a completely different strain.

¢Should we avoid eating pork?

No. Cooked pork products pose no threat to human health—even in a time of swine flu spread.

¢Do the non-surgical face masks we see everywhere in Mexico offer protection?

Not much, if any. The only masks that truly offer protection are the surgical variety—N-95 respirators—which need to be fitted daily and are used by medical professionals in contact with confirmed or suspected swine flu cases.

¢Should we panic?
No. But precautions are in order. We hear about the value of washing hands frequently--but you might want to go one step further. Don't shake hands. Shaking hands with an infected person and then touching your eyes and nose is a very efficient way of transmitting the virus.

The key role of the public health establishment now is surveillance: monitoring what is going on. Only through minute-by-minute data collection will we learn where this situation is headed.

Source URL: https://www.acsh.org/news/2009/04/28/one-flu-over-piggys-nest

Links