

Inadequate Health and Safety Protection Reported by Nurses During the H1N1 Influenza Outbreak

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1. Introduction

As the outbreak of H1N1 influenza began in the United States in April 2009, frontline nurses within SEIU expressed concerns about the occupational health protections being provided to healthcare workers.

Although most healthcare facilities in the United States had been planning for a possible pandemic influenza for several years, an April 2009 survey indicated many were not fully prepared¹.

In addition, early in the outbreak, many state and local health departments provided less protective guidance than that the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to healthcare employers and employees regarding infection control procedures to protect the health of workers at risk of H1N1 flu exposure on their jobs.

To gain a picture of the occupational health protections 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.

2. Conducting the Survey

An existing pandemic flu preparedness survey instrument was modified to gather information on worker health and safety protections from the H1N1 flu provided by employers at healthcare facilities¹.

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.

One survey was completed from each of sixteen healthcare facilities from across California from several different employers and including both large and small and urban and rural facilities.

Further Information

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3. Survey Results

Healthcare Facilities Surveyed, May 6, 2009	16	
Minimum Number of Employees Covered	19,200	
Healthcare Facility Types Surveyed	Hospitals	13
<i>Facilities from north, central and southern in urban and rural locations</i>	Public health facility	1
	Long-term care facility	1
	Outpatient clinic	1
Number of Cases of H1N1 Flu Reported from these Facilities	Confirmed cases	2 to 4
	Probable cases	4 to 7
<i>Half of Facilities (8) reported Don't Know</i>	Suspect cases	8 to 14
	Total cases	14 to 25

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	25%	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%	0/15
	No	33%	5/15
	Don't Know	66%	10/15
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 half reporting	0%	0/16
	Don't Know	38%	6/16

4. Discussion

Respondents reported at least 14 H1N1 cases had been identified at these facilities. At only one in four facilities did respondents report that staff expected to have exposure to H1N1 flu patients had been identified. No respondent reported being aware the facility had protocols to protect workers engaged in high risk procedures with H1N1 patients?

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. Several respondents wrote in that facilities are providing general information on the outbreak (though not worker health and safety information) primarily through emails or links to websites.

No respondents were aware that facilities had critical policies covering issues such as absenteeism of sick leave, absenteeism, family leave and workers compensation, related to H1N1.

Respondents report that 80% of facilities had respirators readily available. However, only about half of respondents reported being proper fit testing to wear a respirator in the past 12 months.

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^{2,3,4}.

Finally, 15 of 16 respondents (92%) “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with the statement that the facility was adequately protecting its staff during this H1N1 outbreak.

The results of this 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 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 lack of healthcare preparedness regarding occupational health and safety needs to protect healthcare workers during a pandemic flu¹. This survey largely confirms the results of that earlier survey, essentially in real time with a pandemic influenza.

5. References

1. Healthcare Workers In Peril: Preparing To Protect Worker Health And Safety During Pandemic Influenza. A Union Survey Report. April 16, 2009. available at <http://www.aflcio.org/issues/safety/upload/panflusurvey.pdf>.
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3. 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.
4. 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.