

EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES AUTHORITY

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TO: LEMSA Administrators
EMS Providers
Regional Disaster Medical and Health Specialists

SUBJECT: IMPENDING INFLUENZA OUTBREAKS

This letter is being issued to Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Providers to warn of impending influenza outbreaks likely to impact your communities and your agencies.

Influenza activity nationally and in California is increasing rapidly and unusually early this year. In the winter of 1997-98 a similar epidemic caused severe stress on the healthcare system, due in part to the nursing shortage (which is ongoing) and a decrease in hospital bed capacity, particularly intensive care. The peak activity occurred at the beginning of the winter holiday season, which further contributed to personnel shortages. The current outbreak may be even more severe. Up-to-date summaries of influenza activity are available at <http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/dcdc/VRDL/html/FLU/Fluintro.htm>

Most of the influenza strains detected in the U.S. this season are a genetic variant of the strain present in the current influenza vaccine. This means that the current vaccine will provide cross- protection, decreasing the severity of illness, if not preventing infection; so, **vaccination is worthwhile.**

We urge all EMS Providers to take measures that can lessen the impact of a local influenza outbreak on your organizations and your community, especially those at high risk of complications such as pneumonia, hospitalization and death:

- ✓ Get vaccinated! Encourage all EMS providers and their families to be vaccinated. Studies have shown that vaccinating healthcare providers can decrease the risk of influenza outbreaks and keep the EMS providers illness free and able to provide EMS services to the community. Supplies are running short and public health inventories are now very limited. Encourage EMS providers to avail themselves of flu vaccination clinics in your area.
- ✓ Institute a respiratory hygiene program in your workplace and when contacting patients. Patients and staff with respiratory symptoms should rest at home and go out while ill. If they must mingle with other people then they should be encouraged to follow the respiratory hygiene guidelines as described below.

- ✓ Review vacation requests for the winter holidays to ensure adequate staffing in the event of an outbreak occurring over this period, and consider methods to identify and mobilize additional staff.

What is a Respiratory Hygiene Program?

Taking proper and active hygiene measures will prevent the transmission of any respiratory illness. Respiratory hygiene measures include:

- Provide a mask to all patients with symptoms of a respiratory illness, especially when transporting the patient in a closed environment (ambulance).
- For patients who cannot wear a surgical mask, provide tissues and clear instructions to cover the nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing.
- Provide, if possible, a small paper or plastic bag for mask and tissue disposal. Instruct the patient to place used tissues immediately into the trash bag.
- Hand washing is the most important element of prevention. Wash hands frequently, especially before touching eyes or face and before preparing food.
- If hand washing is not feasible, utilize a waterless hand hygiene product.
- If you do become ill with flu-like symptoms (fever, cough, malaise), drink plenty of fluids and rest at home.
- Typically, no visit to the doctor is needed for influenza, however if a person is considered high risk due to other medical conditions or very young/advanced age, or if their symptoms do not significantly diminish or increase after 5-6 days they should seek medical attention, preferably at their doctor's office or urgent care clinic rather than an emergency room.
- Avoid giving children or teenagers with flu-like illness any medications containing aspirin as it may increase the risk of Reye's syndrome. Encourage patients and their families to read labels on all over the counter medicines and follow their directions carefully.

Sincerely,

Richard Watson
Interim Director