

## Are You Ready for a Pandemic?

It appears that Influenza A (H1N1) or 'swine flu' will spread throughout New Zealand and it will certainly hit us - even here in the deep South!

The best we can do is ensure that we are as prepared as possible to minimise the impact that the flu has on ourselves, our staff and businesses. You may have already prepared some policies and procedures several years ago for the 'bird flu' and this is the time to revisit those documents and talk to your staff about adapting those to meet the current situation.

It seems that the 'swine flu' is relatively mild in most instances, however it is extremely contagious and the most at risk group appears to be healthy young people, rather than the old and the very young as with the normal seasonal influenza. Swine flu symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people also have diarrhoea and vomiting. So despite what the media might have us believe, there is no need to panic, but it does make good sense to be prepared!

### Reducing Transmission

The WHO says that the main route of transmission of the virus is similar to seasonal influenza, via droplets that are expelled by speaking, sneezing or coughing. You and your staff can prevent getting infected by avoiding close contact with people who show influenza-like symptoms (trying to maintain a distance of about 1 metre if possible) and by taking the following measures:

- avoid touching your mouth, nose and ears;
- clean hands thoroughly with soap and water, or cleanse them with an alcohol-based hand rub on a regular basis;
- avoid close contact with people who might be ill;
- reduce the time spent in crowded settings if possible;
- improve airflow in your living/working spaces by opening windows;
- practise good health habits including adequate sleep, eating nutritious food, and keeping physically active.

### Planning to Keep Your Business Going

Employers need to consider how they will keep their business going in the event that a number of staff are away from work, either with the flu themselves or caring for family members. Such considerations may include:

- Educating staff about reducing transmission through the hygiene measures listed above
- Identifying social distancing arrangements that can be put into place e.g. vary working patterns to limit the number of people in the workplace at one time, arranging for some staff to work from home, changing work patterns, holding meetings with clients or customers in areas away from other people and using other methods to reduce or remove direct contact between staff and customers such as email, internet and video/phone conferencing.
- Encouraging staff not to come to work if they are feeling unwell or have infected family members. The Ministry of Health advises that if someone does become sick that they should stay home for seven days after their symptoms begin or until they have been symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer.
- Identifying key business activities and the staff required to enable these e.g. IT services. Do you need to arrange for back-up in some circumstances?
- Managing leave arrangements for absent staff.

There are some useful government websites for employers to refer to for information on reducing transmission and business continuity planning, these are [www.moh.govt.nz](http://www.moh.govt.nz) and [www.med.govt.nz](http://www.med.govt.nz). It is important to start your planning now, before your business is hit with high levels of illness, so that you and your staff know what to expect if the worst happens.

*Should you require further advice regarding Pandemic Planning please feel free to contact one of our team.*