



Maricopa County

Public Health

Office of the Director, Dr. Bob England

May 4, 2009

Dear Parents,

You've heard a lot in the past week or so about the so-called "swine flu," and its impact on our community. There has been a lot of conflicting information out there. In cooperation with your child's school district, I am sending this letter today to share with you the impact of this new flu virus on your children and their school, and to let you know what you can do to help.

First, I want you to know that I take the health of this community and the health of our children very seriously. That is one of the reasons that in response to our earliest confirmed cases, I recommended the temporary dismissal of three schools in the county. In the days since, we have been rapidly gathering information and consulting with experts. I have carefully weighed the scientific data and discussed the matter with state and federal health officials, as well as with district school superintendents and other school officials.

Current data shows that this new strain of flu is behaving just like the seasonal flu we all know. It does not seem to make people any sicker than the regular flu. It appears that the virus is already broadly spread in the community. Therefore, a handful of individual school dismissals will not help to slow its spread. Closing all schools for a time might help, but the disease does not seem severe enough to warrant the disruption to your lives, to your child's education and to the community that would result. After all, we don't close schools every year for regular, seasonal flu.

Therefore, I have decided to recommend against any more school closures *unless* I begin seeing a significant cluster of cases in a school. I am also not recommending cancellation or avoidance of any school event like a prom, graduation, or field trips. I will be keeping a close eye on this evolving situation, on how the outbreak looks elsewhere, and on whether there are signs of increased illness in your child's school. If I see any indications that this flu is becoming more dangerous, or if I see a particular school with a significant cluster of cases, I will take whatever steps necessary in order to stop the spread, including but not limited to dismissing school(s).

Basically, your Public Health Department is handling this new flu outbreak in the same way we handle any flu outbreak, only more diligently.

Your schools will work with students on proper hygiene and will monitor absenteeism rates. Importantly, your school will stringently enforce that any sick child must remain home from school. Any student with influenza-like illness (a moderate to high fever, body aches, fatigue, cough, often a sore throat, plus other symptoms sometimes) must stay home until at least 7 days after his or her symptoms started or at least 24 hours without fever, *whichever is longer*.

How much this virus continues to spread is not in my hands – it's in yours.

Please help by teaching your children how to protect themselves and others from the flu and many other infectious diseases. I am asking you to take 5 minutes today and talk to your children about three things:

1. **Proper hand-washing practices**; the best way to make sure your child is washing their hands properly is to teach them to either sing the “Happy Birthday” song or the “Alphabet” song for the length of time that they are scrubbing their hands with soap.
2. **Coughing and Sneezing into a tissue or sleeve- not in hands**; When droplets of spit from a cough or sneeze land on your kids hands, any potential virus can easily be passed on to you or classmates. (Don’t forget to wash hands after using a tissue.)
3. **Keeping hands away from eyes, noses and mouths**; Viruses such as flu travel into the body through places like our eyes, nose and mouth. If you teach your child to keep their hands away from these places, there is less of a chance of your child picking up an illness.

Above all, do NOT send your child to school if they are sick.

Lastly, I want to assure you that we are not taking this lightly, and we don’t want you to, either. All flu can be a serious disease for some people. Regular, seasonal flu and its complications kills an average of 36,000 people each year in this country, and hundreds here in Maricopa County. Thus, this new flu will also cause serious illness and deaths. You will no doubt hear about some of these as the epidemic progresses.

The flurry of testing that has been done in the past week shows that there is still plenty of seasonal flu in our community. Any strain of flu can be dangerous to persons with underlying chronic illnesses like asthma, diabetes, heart conditions, and so forth, which put them at increased risk for complications of the flu. Those of you with children who have such conditions have probably been told this by your health care provider and have been urged to get flu shots each fall. Unfortunately, we do not yet have a vaccine against this new flu strain, but all of the above actions should help to protect your children. If you have further concerns, you may wish to consult with your health care provider for additional advice.

Updates have been changing daily. I urge you to seek information from reputable sources. Our website contains updates, links to sites for the Arizona Department of Health Services and to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and you can even sign up for rapid updates from our Twitter account. Find everything at **wearepublichealth.org**. If you have a specific question, please call Community Information and Referral at 602-263-8856.

We are all in this together. Whether your child and other family members become infected with this new virus, or others like it, will largely depend on how well his or her classmates and their parents do their part in helping to prevent this from spreading.

It is not often that our young children have so much control over the outcome of a worldwide situation. However, with your help, your child can make all the difference. Thank you in advance for doing your part.

Stay healthy,



Bob England, MD, MPH
Director
Maricopa County Department of Public Health