



York Central preparing for H1N1 escalation

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York Central Hospital is on high alert to combat the H1N1 virus, should there be a severe outbreak this fall, say staff.

An escalated outbreak has been forecasted by some medical professionals and while cases continue to rise around the globe, Richmond Hill's acute health care centre is in preparing for what could possibly be coming.

The health care centre is currently without any in-patients hospitalized due to the flu virus, but York Central representatives say they are ready if a wave of infected patients were to crash through the emergency room doors.

"We (various hospital officials) are part of a pandemic committee that has been meeting once each week since the beginning of the H1N1 outbreak," Tiziana Rivera, York Central's acting chief practice officer said.

"Our goal is to ready the hospital should there be an influx of residents that need H1N1 assistance on various levels. The plan also extends to staff, volunteers and hospital supplies," Ms Rivera added.

Such a plan includes primary and secondary assessment centres, stock piling personal protective equipment including masks, gloves, gowns and goggles, all to be operational by September 1, as is outlined by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

Primary assessment centres will be set up at various satellite venues away from hospitals, where residents can receive information regarding the H1N1 virus and how to guard against infection.

Secondary assessment centres will be located at local hospitals and will cater to residents showing H1N1 virus symptoms. There the patient can receive nursing care, x-rays, medication and diagnosis.

A designated nurse will also be on hand to triage patients and direct them to their appropriate level of care. If necessary, that patient will be outfitted with precautionary protective equipment such as mask and gloves.

Patients showing signs of infection can also be moved to a specialized section of York Central's new four-tiered emergency waiting area.

Known as the yellow zone; there air flow and pressure can be maintained and monitored for the safety of others.

To date close to 25 residents have been diagnosed with the H1N1 virus at York Central Hospital and 10 of those residents were treated as in-patients for a period of time.

Dr. Danny Chen, York Central Hospital's infectious disease specialist admits he has heard

many predictions, but does not yet subscribe to any particular outcome as the fall and winter flu season approaches.

Still, he says the motto around York Central and within the pandemic committee is an approach of safety first.

"We are simply saying that it is better to be prepared," Dr. Chen said.

"There is quite a range of opinions. Some say nothing is coming, some experts saying we are in for a pandemic crisis, but these things are difficult to accurately predict," Dr. Chen added.

Dr. Chen says he and colleagues have been curiously keeping an eye on the H1N1 statistics coming out of Australia and New Zealand. Two countries similar to Canada in health infrastructure and are currently in the midst of their flu seasons.

Cases of H1N1 in Australia have soared to over 10,000, while the number of deaths from the illness has climbed to more than 50 cases. The Australian federal government last month issued the warning of a 6,000 death toll worst case scenario. Australia's population is two-thirds that of Canada's.

Dr. Chen admits the statistics surrounding H1N1 deaths coming out of Australia have escalated, but he is quick to point out that the average flu kills between 3,000 and 6,000 people in Canada each year and that most of those who have died from the H1N1 virus in Canada have been elderly people also suffering from other illnesses.

As of July 29, there had been 19 recorded H1N1 deaths in Canada and 3,938 confirmed cases of H1N1 flu virus in Ontario reported through the integrated Public Health System (iPHIS) as of July 25, 2009.

The World Health Organization says the counting of individual cases through laboratory testing is now no longer essential, but various media outlets report more than 7,000 diagnosed cases across the country.

For more information on H1N1, contact the York Region Public Health Department's Health Connection at 1-800-361-5653.