



September 28, 2009

Dear School Superintendent:

On behalf of the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), thank you very much for reporting influenza-related absenteeism to MDH. This information has been extremely valuable in helping us determine the level and geographic distribution of influenza-like activity in Minnesota. We are writing now because we have received requests for information on influenza activity in schools and we would like to share with you our plans for communicating this information.

We view it as a good sign that people are interested in influenza-like activity in schools because it allows us the opportunity to educate the public on the widespread nature of the current outbreak and the steps they can take to help prevent the spread of influenza.

Last week, we received questions about the number of schools meeting the threshold for reporting influenza-related absenteeism to MDH. For the first several days, we responded with aggregate numbers. However, we recently received two requests from the news media for specific names of schools that have reported. These data are public data so that if the media specifically request these data, we must provide it. However, we believe that what people are most interested in is the general nature of the outbreak—the regions where we are experiencing heightened influenza-like activity and a sense of that activity.

As you know, we have several influenza surveillance systems in Minnesota, including hospitalizations for influenza, a sentinel outpatient network that reports on the numbers of patients with influenza-like illness they are seeing each week, and outbreaks in schools. We already report on the hospitalizations and on the sentinel network with posted information on the MDH Web site. We also plan to begin reporting influenza-like illness activity in schools on the MDH Web site as follows:

Every Wednesday, the MDH Web site will display the number of schools, by county, that reported influenza activity to MDH during the previous week. This display will not include the names of the schools. The activity reported will reflect the prior week's activity and not be cumulative.

If the media request a specific list, as mentioned earlier, this will be provided. We understand that providing such a list to the news media may create additional scrutiny of those schools. To ensure that the media have a better understanding of the data, we intend to provide any specific information with the following caveats:

- The list indicates those schools that had either five percent of their student body absent or three students absent in any one elementary school classroom during the previous week.
- People should not assume that if a school is not on the list, it does not have influenza circulating; a school not currently on the list could still have an increased level of absenteeism due to influenza-like illness.
- Being on the list does not mean a school is a “hot spot.”
- This list should not be used as a decision-making tool to determine if children should go to school or engage with other children from that school. Influenza is widespread in Minnesota and people should assume it is or could be in their school or community and take appropriate protection measures.
- Some of the schools on the list may have already reduced their absenteeism and returned to normal levels because the data reflect the prior week; others will have been reported to us since the data was compiled for that week.

As discussed in earlier communications, we urge schools to communicate with parents when there is increased influenza activity in their school. Because there may be news accounts about particular schools experiencing flu-like activity, it will be especially helpful for parents to have heard about influenza activity first from the school. Also, sometimes the media ask specific questions about individual absences. It is worth remembering the importance of the privacy of students and families, and that those data are not public data.

Again, we truly appreciate our partnership with you. It is important to be able to track this outbreak, and we want to reiterate our interest in helping you in any way we can with questions or concerns about influenza. We know that this is a difficult time, so we encourage you to communicate with us about how we can help you prevent the spread of influenza. Minimizing influenza in schools is one of the most important steps we can take to protect all Minnesotans from influenza.

If you have any questions or need more information regarding influenza-like activity, please contact Pam Gahr at MDH 651 201-5414; pam.gahr@state.mn.us. For communication issues, please contact Bill T. Walsh at bill.t.walsh@state.mn.us; 651 582-1145.

Sincerely,



Sanne Magnan, M.D., Ph.D.
Commissioner of Health



Alice Seagren, Commissioner
MN Department of Education