

Talking Points/Q&A
“Fatal Contact” Television Movie
May 9, 2006

- “Fatal Contact” is a work of fiction – not a documentary. Its primary purpose is entertainment – not information.
- Some elements of the movie accurately reflect what *might* happen during a pandemic, under a “worst case” scenario. However, other aspects of the movie do not accurately depict the strategies we currently plan to use in response to a major pandemic. To view the pandemic flu annex to the state emergency operations plan, go to:

www.hsem.state.mn.us/readyminnesota/New_Ready_Web/PanFluSup.pdf

...and to view the state public health pandemic plan, go to:

www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/flu/pandemic/plan/index.html

- The movie is based on speculation about the future – what *might* happen – and does not reflect our current situation:
 - The bird flu virus that’s currently making people sick in Asia is still almost entirely a disease of birds.
 - Only about two hundred people have gotten this form of bird flu, over the last three years.
 - That’s because, right now, people get the illness almost exclusively from birds – not from each other.
 - The Asian bird flu virus *cannot* cause a human pandemic *unless* and *until* it develops the ability to be passed easily from person to person. So far, that still hasn’t happened.
 - The Asian bird flu virus hasn’t been reported anywhere in the western hemisphere – in birds *or* humans.
 - Unless the virus develops the ability to be passed easily from human to human, a human case or an infected bird, here in the U.S., would *not* signal the beginning of a pandemic.
 - There is currently no human influenza pandemic – anywhere in the world.
- The pandemic depicted in the movie represents a “worst case” scenario.
 - Three global influenza pandemics have occurred over the last century.
 - The worst of these pandemics occurred in 1918. If a similar pandemic occurred today, the impact might be similar to the pandemic depicted in the movie.

- However, a future pandemic could also be more like the pandemics that occurred in 1957 and 1968. Those pandemics had an impact more like that of regular, “seasonal” flu.
- The film does provide an accurate sense of the impact that a major pandemic could have on society. Under a worst-case scenario, a pandemic could make up to 30% of the population ill, resulting in up to 30,000 deaths in Minnesota alone. Many people would be unwilling or unable to go in to work, potentially resulting in widespread social disruption. Basic services and supplies – like food, water and electricity – could be at least temporarily unavailable.
- In our state, up to 172,000 people could require hospital-level care, placing a potentially overwhelming burden on the health care system. Hospitals statewide have already been making plans, on a regional basis, to handle this massive demand for health care.
- The film also accurately depicts potential delays in developing a vaccine that would be effective against the pandemic flu strain. Any flu strain currently in circulation would have to change substantially before it could cause a pandemic – and the new pandemic strain would have to be identified and isolated before work could begin on a vaccine. Using current technology, and relying on existing production capacity, a vaccine probably wouldn’t be available for up to six months.
- The federal government is currently funding efforts to improve vaccine production technology, and expand production capacity.
- While the film paints a daunting picture, it should inspire efforts to prepare for a possible pandemic – not despair or panic. A major pandemic will inevitably have a major impact on society. However, there are steps that individuals, families, health care providers, and entire communities can take to prepare for a pandemic.
- These measures will help to save lives and lessen the damage that a pandemic would cause. We can survive a pandemic if we remember a simple fact – *we’re all in this together*.
- For more information on how you can prepare for a pandemic, go to the federal pandemic flu website at www.pandemicflu.gov – or the state pandemic site at www.birdflu.state.mn.us.

Q&A

Many people in the movie are wearing surgical masks. Will masks protect me?

If a real pandemic occurs, a special kind of mask called an N95 respirator would be recommended for Minnesota health care workers who have contact with infectious patients.

Surgical masks may also be recommended for people who are ill or potentially infected with the flu virus when they are in contact with others, to reduce the risk of spreading the virus when they

cough or sneeze. Public health officials will revise and update these recommendations, as they continue to prepare for a possible pandemic.

The movie suggests that the virus can be spread in many ways in addition to coughing or sneezing – including things like shaking hands, kissing, sharing drinks, etc. Is that true?

The influenza virus would be spread primarily through contaminated droplets that are released into the air when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or exhales. There is also evidence that the virus can remain in the air even when contaminated droplets are no longer present.

However, an influenza virus can also infect people if they touch contaminated surfaces, and then touch their faces. The best way to protect yourself – and others – is to:

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Put used tissues in a wastebasket.
- Cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve if you don't have a tissue.
- Clean your hands after coughing or sneezing, using soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Stay at home if you are sick, to avoid exposing others to the flu.

The film suggests that there will be a shortage of antiviral drugs like Tamiflu in a pandemic. Is that true? And if so, what is the government doing to prevent it?

The federal government is stockpiling enough antivirals for 25% of the U.S. population, based on what we currently know about the dose required to treat a pandemic influenza strain. To date, enough antivirals have been purchased to treat 26 million people, and federal officials expect to have enough for 81 million people by the end of 2008.

Based on information from past pandemics, that may be enough to treat most of the people who would become ill. However, because influenza viruses change over time, antivirals may not work once the virus develops the ability to cause a pandemic – and even if they do, the dose needed to treat the illness may have to be increased. That means the available supply of antivirals may not go as far as expected. However, use of antivirals is only one of several strategies that will be used to help reduce the impact of a pandemic.

In the movie, officials quickly find out that there is no vaccine available when the pandemic occurs – and there won't be for many months. Will we have vaccine available during a pandemic?

Not immediately – and possibly not for several months.

Flu viruses change over time – that's why people need to get a flu shot every fall, using a newly formulated vaccine. If an existing flu strain changes enough to cause a pandemic, no existing vaccine will be a precise match for it. Work can't begin on a new vaccine until the pandemic strain is identified. Using existing technology and production capabilities, it will take at least 6 months to begin producing a pandemic vaccine.

Federal officials have been developing and stockpiling an experimental vaccine for the Asian bird flu strain. Officials plan to have enough of this vaccine available for 20 million people. If

the Asian bird flu strain develops into a pandemic strain, officials believe that the experimental vaccine may offer some protection – and help delay or lessen the initial impact of a pandemic – while a vaccine against the actual pandemic strain is being developed and produced.

The federal government is also funding efforts to improve vaccine production technology and build up production capacity, so a new vaccine can be developed and produced more rapidly in a pandemic.

In the film, entire neighborhoods are quarantined. Will people be quarantined during a pandemic? And how will it be done?

The kind of quarantine shown in the film – known technically as “cordon sanitaire” – would only be used in extreme cases, if at all.

Quarantine is used to keep people who may be infected but are not yet ill from having contact with others, in order to contain the spread of the illness. Today, quarantine typically means confining people who may be infected in their homes or a community-based facility, usually on a voluntary basis. That’s the approach taken in current state and federal plans for responding to a pandemic.

Quarantine would most likely be used during the early phase of an emerging pandemic, in an effort to contain the outbreak before it spreads too far. Once a pandemic has begun to spread, quarantine is no longer likely to be effective. At that point, “social distancing” strategies would be used to limit contact between people. That means things like staying home when you’re ill, avoiding large gatherings, and staying home from work or school – possibly for as long as two weeks or more.

In the movie, the virus is begins to develop resistance to anti-viral drugs. Could that happen? If so, why are we stockpiling them?

Two different antiviral drugs – Tamiflu and Relenza – have shown effectiveness in treating influenza. Early evidence suggests that Tamiflu may also be effective in treating people who are infected with the Asian bird flu strain.

Resistance to the drug has been reported in some individual patients who were being treated with Tamiflu. However, while the virus appears to have developed resistance in those patients while they were being treated, the resistant form of the virus has not been transmitted to other people. Resistance to the drug also seems to be associated with starting the drug too late, or using an insufficient dose.

If the patient is started on Tamiflu with a few days after symptoms first appear – and the proper dose is used – Tamiflu appears to be effective in treating the Asian bird flu strain in humans.

The other antiviral drug – Relenza – has never been used to treat the Asian bird flu strain, because it isn’t available in many of the countries where this influenza strain has made people ill. However, according to experts, it should also be an effective treatment.

The federal government is stockpiling enough antivirals for 25% of the U.S. population, based on what we currently know about the dose required to treat a pandemic influenza strain. To date, enough antivirals have been purchased to treat 26 million people, and federal officials expect to have enough for 81 million people by the end of 2008.

Partly to avoid relying solely on a single medication, a mix of Tamiflu and Relenza is being purchased for the stockpile. Eighty percent of the stockpile will be Tamiflu and 20% will be Relenza.

However, use of antivirals is only one of several strategies that will be used to help reduce the impact of a pandemic.

In the film, many essential services (electricity, food, water) are disrupted during the pandemic. Could that actually happen?

During a severe pandemic, up to 30% of the population may be ill, and another 10% may be unwilling or unable to come to work. In addition to high levels of illness and death, we may need to cope with extensive social disruption and economic loss. That could include the interruption of basic services like public transportation and food delivery.

A pandemic would also place heavy demands on the health care system. Health care facilities may be overwhelmed, creating a shortage of staffed hospital beds, ventilators and other resources. We may need to provide care in non-traditional sites, like schools or sports facilities.

In the film, many people simply walked off their jobs. Would that really occur?

In a severe pandemic, it is very possible that up to 40% of the workforce will be out sick or at home taking care of sick family members. That may include health care workers, who could be exposed to the illness either on the job or out in the broader community. A small number of people may also stay home simply because they are too frightened to go out in public.

Businesses are being encouraged to begin planning now for a possible pandemic, so they will be able to maintain operations with a reduced workforce, and allow people to work from home whenever possible.

What will be done with the overwhelming number of deceased bodies if we have a severe, 1918-like pandemic, like the one in the film?

Based on the experience of 1918, we believe that as many as 30,000 Minnesotans could die during a major pandemic. That’s roughly double the number of people who normally die every year in our state.

Arrangements are being made to handle this large number of fatalities, using mobile and emergency morgue facilities, as part of the state’s new pandemic flu plan. Details are available at www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/flu/pandemic/plan/10deceased.pdf.

Deciding who gets vaccinated was a major issue in the film. In a real pandemic, how will you decide who gets the vaccine first?

During the 1957 and 1968 pandemics – and every year during the regular “flu season” – a number of specific groups have faced the greatest risk of hospitalization and death. Those groups have included infants, the elderly, and people with underlying health conditions. Those groups – along with health care providers, who would be needed to care for the ill – would probably get the first supplies of vaccine.

However, in 1918, most of the deaths occurred among young, healthy adults. We may also need to consider giving the vaccine to people who will be needed to keep society running – people who provide basic services or commodities like transportation, electricity, food and water. We will need to be flexible – and adjust our recommendations for vaccination as necessary – as the pandemic unfolds.

Initial recommendations for the use of available vaccine are included in the federal pandemic plan developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, available at www.pandemicflu.gov.

In the movie, the Virginia governor's son dies because he cannot get diabetes medicine. Could critical medications be unavailable – or in short supply – during a pandemic?

Medicine and other essential supplies could be hard to get during a pandemic. Individuals and families should begin now to develop their own emergency plans, and start stockpiling food, water, medicines, and other essential items – enough to last up to two weeks, if possible. As part of these preparations, they should talk to their doctor about how to ensure an adequate supply of critical prescription medications.