

## Managing Editor's Desk

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# H1N1: Putting Our Good Work on Display for Others to See

**A** major piece of the NEHA program involves meetings. In addition to the annual conference that NEHA sponsors, the association also conducts a range of seminars, workshops, and business meetings. This set of activities takes NEHA into the hospitality and travel worlds, where it becomes our job to interact with professionals from those industries. While the overlap between our professions tends to be minimal, instances do occur where it becomes enormous. One such instance occurred when the H1N1 swine flu virus exploded onto the scene in late April. Suddenly, the very health and viability of the meetings and travel industry (to say nothing of schools, institutional facilities, mass events, etc.) became dependent on the daily pronouncements and decisions of the public and environmental health community. As you will no doubt recall, even our vice president added to his fame when he publicly discouraged people from getting onto an airplane while we were in the midst of sorting out what this new flu virus was all about.

As you will also recall, the reaction from the travel and meetings industry to the vice president's comments was swift, furious, and indicting. In fact, during those worrisome times, many voices materialized with shouts that the media had overreacted to this virus and that this false alarm would serve to discredit public health's voice in the future.

In response to these events, I was invited to author a blog post that would be directed to these other professions. I am sharing that post below for two reasons. First, I want the NEHA audience to see how their association is standing up for our profession. Second, an important message is here about how, at the

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end of the day, society depends on our quiet and all-too-often invisible profession and it's about time that others realized that!

### **Blog Post from April**

The public and environmental health experts at CDC and elsewhere (WHO, state and local health departments, and the CDC counterparts in countries around the world) are at this moment still advising "abundant caution" as we continue both to monitor and learn more about the new H1N1 virus. The virus continues to spread. Increasing numbers of schools are being shut down. Even after a week of extraordinary media at-

tion, the issue remains the lead story on most television news reports and newspaper headlines. As the story of what this virus is becomes more clear, however, we are now learning that it "appears" to be a surprisingly mild strain; it isn't transmitted quite as easily as we initially feared; and that all things considered, it will probably not even compare to the typical seasonal influenza that we all but ignore when we go about our daily routines during the fall and winter influenza season.

In the wake of these newfound and preliminary findings, we are also beginning to hear the inevitable criticisms from various segments of society—including some members of the meetings and travel industries—that the media's fascination with this "threat" represents yet another example of the kind of sensationalism that this industry depends on to sell its product. In addition, the mounting criticisms also are directed at the public and environmental health establishments. We are being accused of promoting our own agenda of sensationalism and self-justification for, presumably, attempting to demonstrate that our earlier predictions of a dramatic pandemic were indeed correct.

As I listen carefully to some of the criticism, it is not difficult to connect the dots. Aside from the disdain that many feel for the media's all-too-frequent use of sensationalism to draw people to its product, the fear, the flight cancellations, and the meeting cancellations cost many in the meeting and travel industries a good bit of revenue. And for what? A virus that appears to be less a threat than even the often-ignored seasonal flu virus?

*continued on page 48*

## Managing Editor's Desk

continued from page 62

To these industries, and particularly to those within them who question the scale of the public and environmental health response that was mounted, I say thank goodness we had this event! In fact, I maintain the view that this may be one of the best things that has ever happened to us! Please hear me out, because I am going to try to impress upon you that this point of view has significant merit—even as we in public and environmental health feel your pain over the revenue losses you've suffered.

For the sake of brevity, I will dispense with the medical story and why a new virus made up of four different genetic heritages is so scary. I will not address the implications of what this means for humans, who have no immunity to such a potentially potent virus. I will also skip over the many reasons we have to face such threats without the protection of vaccines that take between six and eight months to manufacture. I will also not comment on the prospect of this spring's eruption being a herald wave that may very well be followed by a much deadlier second and even third wave in the months ahead. And finally, I will also pass over the significance of the virus being transmitted by a human to an Alberta, Canada, herd of pigs. Suffice it to say, however, that these points all argue for taking this new virus very seriously.

To take a different tack, I want to begin with the observation that we live in a dangerous world.

Regardless of whether this particular H1N1 virus evolves into a dreaded pandemic virus, the fact is that pandemics are a part of nature and they happen largely because of the easily changeable RNA nature of an influenza virus. What makes a pandemic particularly scary is that we live in a society that is hugely interdependent. Unlike 1918, when humans endured the last devastating flu pandemic, we depend today on a labyrinth of crisscrossing, complex, and highly interdependent urban infrastructures for our standard of living and quality of life. We truck our food in so that we might eat to our heart's content; we enjoy a panoply of modern conveniences thanks to electricity that is available to us at the flip of a switch; we tool around town because we can quickly and easily fuel our cars; we benefit from prescription drugs because we've set up vast systems that enable

us to import most of their ingredients; and ... we meet all over the planet thanks to the convenience of a worldwide transportation and energy system that makes getting to a meeting, and enjoying a pleasant meeting environment, possible.

These systems are complex and they are fragile. One need only recall that New Orleans—a major and modern 21st century American city—became instantly dysfunctional when its systems collapsed under the weight of the wreckage of Hurricane Katrina.

At the same time that we live with unprecedented infrastructure interdependence, we find ourselves living in an increasingly dangerous world. Many of the predictions concerning the impact of global warming are worrisome. We haven't had a pandemic since the late '60s, which makes one increasingly likely as the years go by. (We had three pandemics during the last century.) Personally, my big concern involves the prospect of a terrorist event that could unleash carnage the likes of which we can scarcely imagine. Just last December, an esteemed Congressional bipartisan commission released its report entitled, "A World at Risk." In that report, a prediction was made that a better-than-even chance exists that a terrorist event involving weapons of mass destruction would occur sometime before 2013.

The report expressed particular worry about a biological attack. It also noted that Pakistan is of particular concern, and that was before the Taliban had made it to within 60 miles of Islamabad.

Now just suppose for a moment that something truly awful did happen, even if it was *only* a natural disaster? First, it wouldn't take much to topple the system. Second, who can protect us and minimize the damage to people's health and even survivability? In the midst of the responders, relief workers, police and firefighters, and the like, you also see the public and environmental health profession. After all, protecting the public's health is what drives this profession. In a very real sense, we are one of society's insurance policies against the kind of destruction and havoc that any type of disaster could cause.

A pandemic is one of the many disasters we plan for. To date, countless plans have been developed and exercised through tabletop and mock drills. But until now, everything had been in the abstract. We'd done the fire drills without the scorching reality of a

real fire. That all changed when reports began to surface that a new virus had emerged from nature and that it was killing people.

Suddenly, plans were put into effect all across North America and in many other countries around the world. With the implementation of these plans, we learned. We learned that our response has to be scaled to the public's expectations, which are largely driven by the media and not necessarily by the science of the issue. We learned about the impact of Twitter on information flow within the community. We learned how to coordinate in real time with a variety of agencies. We learned how to make intelligent policy decisions based on the epidemiological course of the virus. But most importantly, we all got much better at how to properly respond to a threat of this nature and to even other threats such as those I mentioned earlier.

We stand today better prepared for whatever might come our way tomorrow—irrespective of how stressed our interdependent infrastructures might get in a crisis situation. Given the minimal preparedness planning that people do on their own, thank goodness that we had this test. Our overall preparedness system has improved by quantum leaps. And thank goodness this all seems to have happened during a threat that appears to have been weak and mild.

Yes, this month has no doubt stressed both the meetings and travel industries. This event represents an occurrence that none of us would have ever wished for. Nonetheless, it did happen. And as a result, we have improved our abilities to deal with threats to the public's health immeasurably.

I have one last point to make. The public and environmental health infrastructure has been chronically underfunded and undersupported for years. It has also eroded, despite the good work of many in this system. And yet the importance of this infrastructure for safeguarding our precious way of life has arguably never been greater. We can only hope that as our work has become more visible over the course of this H1N1 scare, more segments of society will recognize how important we truly are to their own future viability and success. It is my personal hope that this recognition will spur greater support for the public and environmental health workforce. 🐼

