

May 4, 2006

## **STATE COMMENTS ON UPCOMING TV MOVIE**

On Tuesday, May 9 at 8 p.m., the ABC television network will air a made-for-TV movie titled “Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America.” The movie follows an outbreak of the H5N1 avian flu virus from its origins in a Hong Kong market through its mutation into a pandemic virus that becomes easily transmittable from human to human and spreads rapidly around the world. Among the story lines featured, several of the movie’s key characters are the Secretary of Health & Human Services, a CDC Epidemic Intelligence Service officer, and the Governor of Virginia.

Because this movie may raise concern among viewers, Dr. Richard Mandsager, state Public Health Director for the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, warned Alaskans to keep the following points in mind:

- The ABC movie “Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America” is a movie, not a documentary. It is a work of fiction designed to entertain and not a factual accounting of a real world event.
- There is no influenza pandemic in the world at this time.
- Also, it is important to remember that H5N1 avian influenza is almost exclusively a disease of birds and that it has not yet appeared in the U.S.
- Should the H5N1 virus appear in the U.S., it does not mean the start of a pandemic.
- The next influenza pandemic could be substantially less severe than what the movie depicts or the one that occurred in 1918. For example, the influenza pandemics of 1957/58 and 1968/69 caused so much less illness and death than did the 1918/19 pandemic that many Americans at that time did not distinguish them from seasonal influenza and were unaware that a pandemic was underway.
- While the movie does serve to raise awareness about avian and pandemic flu, we hope it will inspire preparation – not panic. There are steps individuals, families and communities can take to prepare. You can keep a supply of food and medicines on hand in case you have to stay home, you can practice good public health measures like frequent hand washing and staying home when sick. There is good information available on [www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov)
- The film does depict scenarios that could unfold should a severe pandemic ever develop, including limited availability of antivirals and vaccines as well as the potential for disruption of supplies, medicines and other essential services.

- The film also illustrates the expected months-long delay in developing an effective vaccine against a pandemic strain of influenza once it emerges. This is why, at the President's request, the Congress approved funding for the Department of Health and Human Services to make significant financial investments to improve the technology for vaccine development and to build up our domestic vaccine production capacity, to ensure more rapid availability of vaccine for the population in a pandemic.
- The film highlights an important aspect of planning – individual and community planning and cooperation that will be so vital to sustaining communities and neighborhoods during an extended wave should an influenza pandemic occur. Alaska's state-wide pandemic influenza response plan, as well as an extensive set of planning checklists for families, pet owners, businesses, schools, health care providers, and community organizations are available at [www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov).
- While the H5N1 virus has not yet appeared in the U.S., and there is no influenza pandemic in the world at this time, it is important for all Alaskans to be informed about this potential public health threat and some of the steps individual Americans can take to protect themselves and their families in the event of a pandemic.

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

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

Surgical masks are recommended for health care workers who are subjected to repeated exposure to multiple patients. For health care workers performing certain medical procedures on infected patients, N95 respirators are recommended. Surgical masks are also recommended for patients who are infected to help reduce the potential for spread of virus when these people cough or sneeze. DHSS will continue to review and update as needed its public health guidance on the use of masks and respirators by healthcare workers and by the general public.

### **The movie shows the virus spreading in many ways besides coughing or sneezing, such as handshakes, kissing, sharing drinks, etc. Is that correct?**

Influenza virus is *primarily* spread by airborne droplets that reach the eyes, nose or mouth but can also spread by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching one's face. This highlights the importance of learning and practicing good personal hygiene, including:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Put used tissues in a waste basket.

- Cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve if you don't have a tissue.
- Clean your hands after coughing or sneezing. Use soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Stay at home when you feel sick.

**The film indicates that there will be a shortage of Tamiflu (or other antivirals) in a pandemic. Will there be? And if so, what is the government doing to prevent that?**

DHSS has asked the Legislature for funds to stockpile enough antivirals to treat 25% of the state population should a pandemic occur in Alaska. This figure is based on historical data from past pandemics indicating that roughly 25% of the population would get sick in a pandemic and would benefit from antiviral treatment if started early in the course of illness. To date, Alaska has purchased ## antiviral treatment courses and expects to have on hand a total of ## treatment courses by the end of 200X.

**In the movie officials quickly find out that there is no vaccine available when the pandemic occurs and none will be available for many months. Will Alaskans have vaccine available if a pandemic occurs?**

There likely will be no vaccine initially available that precisely matches the pandemic strain when a pandemic begins. Because influenza viruses continually evolve and mutate, it is not possible to develop a vaccine until after the pandemic strain actually comes into existence. Only after the strain emerges, is isolated and characterized can a vaccine be developed and manufactured. Based on current vaccine production processes and capacities, it will take at least six months to begin producing pandemic vaccine once a pandemic strain occurs.

The federal Department of Health and Human Services has been developing and stockpiling an experimental “pre-pandemic” H5N1 vaccine that may offer some level of immune protection should the H5N1 virus mutate into a pandemic strain. Having a stockpile of this vaccine for up to 20 million people may help delay or lessen the initial impact of a pandemic, while vaccine against the actual pandemic strain is developed and produced.

However, HHS is making significant financial investments to improve the technology for vaccine development and to build up our domestic vaccine production capacity, to ensure more rapid availability of vaccine for the population in a pandemic.

**Many neighborhoods were quarantined in the film. Even the Governor of Virginia quarantined himself, his staff and his family from the rest of the world. Would Alaska’s health officials quarantine people should a pandemic occur?**

The purpose of quarantine is to separate people who have been potentially exposed to a contagious disease and may be infected, but are not yet ill to stop the spread of that disease. The last large-scale quarantine measures that were imposed in Alaska were used in the early 20th century to contain outbreaks of plague, yellow fever, and smallpox.

Today, quarantine typically refers to confining potentially infected persons to their homes or community-based facilities, usually on a voluntary basis. Quarantine can be used for a defined group of people who may have been exposed at a public gathering, or who may have been exposed while traveling, particularly overseas. In extreme cases, quarantine could apply to an entire geographic area, in which case a community may be closed off by sealing its borders or by a barricade, known as a “cordon sanitaire.”

In the case of pandemic influenza, quarantine may be one of the public health tools employed in the early days of an emerging pandemic if efforts are undertaken to contain the outbreak before it spreads too widely. Once a pandemic has begun to spread, quarantine is not likely to be effective in controlling the spread, and instead efforts may turn to “social distancing.” Social distancing includes measures to increase distance between individuals, such as staying home when ill unless seeking medical care, avoiding large gatherings, telecommuting, and school closures.

**In the movie, we learn that the virus is beginning to develop resistance to Tamiflu, rendering the drug useless. Could that really happen? If so, why are we buying so much Tamiflu for the stockpile?**

Tamiflu, and another antiviral, Relenza, have shown effectiveness in treating influenza. Early evidence suggests that Tamiflu may be effective in treating those patients who have been infected with the H5N1 avian flu virus. While there have been a few reports of Tamiflu resistance developing on therapy, there has been no transmission of a resistant virus. The resistance developing on therapy has been associated with starting the drug late or using low doses of this drug. Tamiflu, when used at proper doses and started within a few days of the appearance of symptoms should be effective treatment of this infection.

Relenza has not been used in treating human H5N1 cases to date, as it has been unavailable in many countries that have had people infected with H5N1. But experts expect it would be an effective treatment also.

DHSS is stockpiling enough antivirals to treat 25% of Alaskans, should a pandemic occur in our state. This figure is based on historical data from past pandemics indicating that roughly 25% of the population would get sick in a pandemic. To date, Alaska has purchased ## antiviral treatment courses and expects to have on hand a total of ## treatment courses by the end of 200X. Of its antiviral purchases, the Alaska government is buying approximately 80% of its supply as Tamiflu and about 20% of its supply as Relenza. This is due in part to product availability but also to the need to diversify the supply so as to not rely solely on one medication.

**Many essential services (e.g. electricity, food, water, etc.) become scarce in the film’s scenario. Could that really happen?**

An especially severe influenza pandemic could lead to high levels of illness, death, social disruption, and economic loss. Everyday life would be disrupted because so many people in so many places become seriously ill at the same time. Impacts can range from school and business closings to the interruption of basic services such as public transportation and food delivery.

In addition, a substantial percentage of the world's population will require some form of medical care. Health care facilities can be overwhelmed, creating a shortage of hospital staff, beds, ventilators and other supplies. Non-traditional care sites such as schools may need to be used for patient care to cope with demand.

**The film depicted many people who simply walked off their jobs. Could that really occur?**

In a severe pandemic, it is very possible that up to 40% of a business' or organization's workforce will be out sick or at home taking care of sick family members. It is also possible that a small percentage of this amount will be people who are healthy but who may be too frightened to venture out into public.

The numbers of health-care workers and first responders available to work can be expected to be reduced as they will be at high risk of illness through exposure in the community and in health care settings, and some may have to miss work to care for ill family members.

**What will we do with the overwhelming number of deceased bodies if we have a severe, 1918-like pandemic as was depicted in the film?**

Addressing the possibility of a large number of deceased individuals in a pandemic is one of our top pandemic planning priorities. Currently, we are working on modeling studies to try to determine as clearly as we can what we could possibly expect in terms of numbers of deaths over the course of several pandemic waves. Until these studies are done, we won't be able to speculate on details of what we might or might not expect. We expect this work to be done in the next few months.

Regardless of whatever estimates are developed, it is highly unlikely that we would ever resort to mass graves. The federal government is working with many government agencies and the private sector (e.g. the funeral industry, the cemetery industry) to develop guidance for states, local communities and others that maintains the dignity of the deceased, honors family wishes, and respects religious and social customs.

**Deciding who gets vaccine was a major question in the film. In a real pandemic, how will who gets vaccine first be decided?**

The greatest risk of hospitalization and death—as seen during the last two pandemics in 1957 and 1968 pandemics and during annual influenza—will be in infants, the elderly,

and those with underlying health conditions. These individuals, along with health care providers, who are critical to maintaining a health care system in a pandemic, would likely be the first individuals to receive the first supplies of vaccine. However, in the 1918 pandemic, most deaths occurred in young adults, highlighting the need to remain flexible on determining priorities for vaccination groups based on the epidemiology of an emerging pandemic.

The state Division of Public Health has made recommendations for prioritizing critical populations that might receive the first supplies of vaccine. These recommendations can be found in the state's Pandemic Plan, which is available at [www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov).

**In the movie, the Virginia governor's son dies because he cannot get diabetes medicine; other drugs are not available in pharmacies.**

Essential supplies, including medicine, may become unavailable during a pandemic. As part of effective planning, individuals and families should talk to their doctor about how to maintain adequate access to prescription medications.