

## Response to H1N1 Editorial in Northwest Florida Daily News – October 22, 2009

On Friday, October 16, 2009, the Okaloosa County Health Department sadly reported the first death in Okaloosa County due to the H1N1 influenza virus. On Thursday, October 22, 2009, the Northwest Florida Daily News printed an editorial that criticized the health department for not releasing more information including the person's name, where she lived, and when she died.

In issuing the press release, the Health Department did not comment on any issues that were related to curiosity. We should not pry into the personal matters of this infection one person at a time. There is very good reason for that: revealing these private details about one person's awful tragedy and family loss strays from the important message that needs to be shared with the public about H1N1 influenza.

The H1N1 virus can be found throughout our community – at work, school, and home. Even though the virus is widespread in our county, state, and nation, there is important information that individuals and families need to know. This includes:

- Ways to prevent the spread of H1N1 influenza
- Signs and symptoms of H1N1 influenza and what to do if you are sick

Prevention begins with practicing good hygiene:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer to lessen the spread of respiratory illness
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow or tissue -- then wash your hands
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- Avoid close contact with people who are coughing or otherwise appear ill
- Stay at home if sick to avoid spreading the illness to others

The signs and symptoms of influenza include: fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, fatigue, and in the case of the H1N1 virus, diarrhea and vomiting. Most healthy people with H1N1 influenza have mild illness and do not need medical care or medications that treat virus infections. Some people are more likely to get flu complications, and should talk to a health care provider at first sign of symptoms about whether they need to be examined. Medications to treat influenza must be given early to work the best. Those persons who might need early treatment with medication include:

- Children younger than 5, but **especially** children younger than 2 years old
- Pregnant women
- People 65 and older
- Healthy people with fever and chest cough or congestion
- People who have:
  - Cancer
  - Blood disorders (including sickle cell disease)
  - Chronic lung disease (including asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD))
  - Diabetes
  - Heart disease

- Kidney disorders
- Liver disorders
- Neurological disorders (including nervous system, brain or spinal cord)
- Neuromuscular disorders (including muscular dystrophy and multiple sclerosis)
- Weakened immune systems (including people with AIDS)

Emergency signs of a serious H1N1 infection include:

- In children:
  - fast or troubled breathing
  - bluish skin color
  - not drinking enough fluids
  - not waking up or interacting
  - being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
  - flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and a worse cough
  - fever with a rash
- In adults:
  - difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
  - pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
  - sudden dizziness/confusion
  - severe/persistent vomiting
  - flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and a worse cough

If any of these emergency signs are noticed, people should seek medical attention immediately.

The health department will never hesitate to share information that will truly protect the health of our community. We will also always make every effort to respect and protect individual privacy. Revealing private details about one person who tragically died from the H1N1 infection while this infection has caused illness in thousands in Florida and the nation causes us to focus on somebody else's misfortune and misses the common issues that might threaten or protect us.

I sincerely hope that everyone will take time to understand the H1N1 influenza, learn how to limit the spread of this germ, and know what to do when sick.

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