

Swine flu creates ripples

Area's schools, hospitals take the outbreak in stride

By **GREG MARTIN STAFF WRITER**

Local schools reported an unexplained increase in absences during the first few weeks of this year's fall semester, causing some parents to fear that a pandemic of swine flu is under way.

However, there is no cause for panic, according to Adam DuBois, spokesman for the Charlotte County Health Department.

"We're just treating the symptoms and sending them home," he said, referring to the health department's clinic in Punta Gorda. "It really is just the flu."

At least one drug store in Port Charlotte and another in Arcadia reported brief shortages of the antiviral medication Tamiflu.

Meanwhile, at least one Port Charlotte hospital, Fawcett Memorial Hospital, held a staff meeting Thursday to plan how to inoculate clinical staffers and their families so they won't come down with the flu, as they work to treat those with symptoms, said hospital spokeswoman Michelle Ritter.

School attendance statistics show there were 2,752 excused absences for the second week of school, Aug. 25-29. That's nearly double the 1,414 absences recorded for the same week in 2008.

However, that may be a fluke, according to Mike Riley, spokesman for the Charlotte County school district. He pointed out that the same week in 2008 included a holiday, so there were only four days of school compared to five days this year.

Compared to the fifth week of 2008 (Sept. 15-19), this year's second week of school showed an 11 percent increase in absences.

"We have no idea why a kid is not in school," Riley added. "If we send a kid that's sick home, we have no way of diagnosing if that kid is sick with the swine flu. How can we diagnose that?"

School officials, however, have fielded a number of inquiries from worried parents, and dispelled a few unfounded rumors.

For example, some parents called after hearing that "we had 30 kids in the clinic vomiting" at Lemon Bay High School, Riley said. He pointed out the infirmary is only big enough to accommodate about four people.

The only difference between swine flu and other influenza outbreaks is that this one's occurring outside the normal flu season, Riley said.

Also, absences could be greater because state health officials are advising school administrators to send kids home if they exhibit symptoms, in order to avoid spreading the virus, he said.

"If a kid leaves the school sick, the parents assume it's swine flu," he said.

Swine flu has caused no deaths in Charlotte County, and health officials are no longer tracking infections by conducting "swabs" and testing to confirm the H1N1 virus, DuBois said. They're just treating it.

"We know the bug is here," he said.

Evelyn Schaible, a pharmacist with Gene's Prescription Shop in Port Charlotte, acknowledged that on Wednesday night, she sold the store's last bottle of a liquid form of Tamiflu, intended for use by infants. It was sold to an Arcadia parent who told her she couldn't find the medication in drug stores there, Schaible said.

However, Schaible said Gene's was well stocked with Tamiflu in adult-sized tablets, and was able to get the infant formula restocked by the next morning.

A pharmacist at a CVS at U.S. 17 and State Road 70 in Arcadia said her store was out of Tamiflu.

Another pharmacist at a CVS store in Punta Gorda, however, reported no shortage.

According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a vaccine for swine flu is currently under production, and doses are to become available later in the fall.

The Florida Department of Health already is registering schools and pharmacies interested in giving flu shots as part of a planned mass vaccination.

However, it's common for flu vaccines to be updated each year, because the virus constantly changes to create a new strain, Ritter explained.

"They change; they morph because they know they don't want to die," she said.

At schools, the CDC suggests children and staffers with flu symptoms be separated. Children also should be encouraged to wash their hands and sneeze into sleeves or hankies. Also, classrooms should be "environmentally cleaned."

Early treatment is recommended for people at high risk of infection who exhibit symptoms, according to the CDC.

Those at higher risk include pregnant women, people who care for children under 6 months old, health care workers, and children and adults with underlying medical problems, according to the CDC.

E-mail: g m a r t i n @ s u n - h e r a l d . c o m