

Charlotte reports first swine flu death

By **JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER**

PUNTA GORDA — The Charlotte County Health Department announced Wednesday a 46-year-old Port Charlotte woman is the first in the county to die while infected with the H1N1 virus, commonly known as swine flu.

Cheryl Ann McCabe was found dead in her Port Charlotte home Sept. 1. The cause of death has been determined but won't be released until next week, according to the Charlotte County Sheriff's Office. The medical examiner confirmed the woman's case of swine flu late Tuesday.

McCabe had a pre-existing chronic condition that attacks the immune system, making her more vulnerable to the virus, said Steven Mitnick, administrator of the health department.

"While most cases of H1N1 are mild, it can have deadly consequences," Mitnick said. "(The death) doesn't make this more serious, we're just trying to increase people's awareness to reduce the risk."

McCabe moved to Port Charlotte from New Jersey in 1990.

Her age and compromised immune system made her a prime target for magnified swine flu effects, Mitnick said.

Her husband, 42-year-old Raymond Bei, also died unexpectedly last month at the same residence. Like McCabe, Bei had extensive medical issues, according to a Sheriff's Office report.

And while the county doesn't want to cause panic, officials are beginning to take extra precautions.

A swine flu vaccine was approved by the Food and Drug Administration Tuesday. It's expected to arrive in Charlotte by mid-October. At that point, the health department will implement a countywide vaccination program.

Although the program is voluntary, Mitnick recommends everyone get vaccinated. The first round of doses will go to those with higher risks of infection, including health care personnel, pregnant women and young children.

"Something of this magnitude has never been done before in Charlotte County," Mitnick said. "It's a big challenge, but unlike a hurricane that hits everyone at once, this will be coming over a series of months."

Symptoms of swine flu include fever, headache, dry cough, runny nose and body aches.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has advised people to reduce their risk by washing hands frequently, keeping a 6-foot social distance, covering coughs with a sleeve, and staying home if symptoms occur.

Like many local pharmacies, the health department has run out of children's Tamiflu. But Mitnick said the medicine is relatively ineffective against the new strain.

"H1N1 is everywhere," he said. "It will be in movie theaters, supermarkets and the mall. You probably passed people today who had it and didn't even know. The best thing to do is be (cautious), and stay home if you're infected."

The health department is tracking only swine flu cases that result in hospitalization or death.

Although this is the first swine flu-related death in Charlotte County, the virus has taken its toll on Charlotte's neighbors.

Sarasota has been reported to have widespread activity, with three confirmed deaths, the Sarasota County Health Department verified this week.

Lee County has had three confirmed deaths, and DeSoto has yet to report a swine flu fatality, according to the Florida Department of Health.

And while the virus seems to be gaining steam, county officials said Charlotte is well prepared.

"We're doing everything we can, and I applaud the health department," said Wayne Sallade, Charlotte County director of Emergency Management. "The average person shouldn't be worried. We just have to keep this in front of us."

Still, some parents seem to be panicking.

Schools throughout Charlotte County have seen unexplained decreases in attendance since the start of the school year.

But the only added danger a swine flu outbreak presents over other strains is the lack of a controlled season, said Mike Riley, Charlotte County Public Schools spokesman.

The school district has been meeting weekly with the health department to plan for outbreaks. And unlike other districts, including Lee, Charlotte permits students to bring hand sanitizer to school.

"We realize the schools are a part of the community and very much susceptible," Riley said. "We are on high alert and as on guard as we've ever been."

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