

OUR VIEW

Healthy behavior, vaccines kept swine flu in check

OUR POSITION: Credit flu vaccines and simple public prevention programs for halting the H1N1 flu epidemic.

Remember the swine flu? It appears the feared epidemic of the H1N1 influenza strain has dissipated here and throughout the world. Experts said last week the flu seems to be on its last legs and that chances for a resurgence is growing slimmer. Only a couple of months ago, officials from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised that vigilance in personal hygiene and continued flu vaccinations were necessary to ward off another wave of flu.

From the looks of things, that worked. Credit may be due the public health agencies that targeted vulnerable populations and spread the message, as well as the public that heeded the warnings. In Sarasota County, one-third of all residents received H1N1 vaccines; in Charlotte County, perhaps 20 percent. The flu season typically peaks in late February and early March, but right now there is no flu activity beyond the norm, said Dianne Shipley, media liaison for the Sarasota County Health Department.

Fingers crossed. But it appears certain this epidemic will fall far short of what was first feared when the H1N1 strain made its appearance last April. The virus has not mutated into a deadlier strain. The vaccine has been effective and it has been safe. Statistics from the California Health Department showed that one in every 10,000 Californians who came down with the flu died. By comparison, of the 13 million people who were vaccinated, only three died as a result, and health officials say there were complicating factors that muddied the correlations in those cases. The possibility of another flu wave also will be minimized by the sheer numbers of people who now have immunity. Nationwide, an estimated 70 million people have received the H1N1 vaccine. Add to that the number who already have been infected and nearly 40 percent of the total population has immunity. That simply makes it more unlikely the virus will spread in significant numbers.

The state Department of Health is still advising people to get a shot, and county health departments still have them available for free. Call 941-861-2800 for details in Sarasota County, 941-833-3050 in Charlotte. Vaccines also are available at the the South County Family Health Center at 7820 South Tamiami Trail, just south of the State College of Florida campus. Charlotte County clinics are being held Monday in Port Charlotte, Tuesday in Punta Gorda and Friday in Englewood. Call for information.

The national vaccination program helped stop what might have been a devastating epidemic. The swine flu caused more than 15,000 deaths around the world, most of them in the United States, but that was far below what was initially feared. Shipley credited the highly publicized prevention campaign. People did seem to be more careful about washing their hands often, covering their mouths when they sneezed or coughing into a sleeve. If they got sick, they actually did stay home from work or school. It seems simple preventative measures really did help.

And the mass clinics also seemed to have a big impact, especially since they targeted the schools, said Wanda Toby, the emergency planner with the **Charlotte County Health Department**. "A good majority of kids got vaccinated," she said. As for the great swine flu scare, Toby added, "We prepare for the worst and hope for the best. It didn't happen as bad as we thought it would and I, for one, am thankful for it." We are, too.