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Swine Flu Update

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No doubt you have heard of the swine flu outbreak in Mexico by now. It has the potential to be a worldwide epidemic and to reach South Africa. We should not panic, but nor should we ignore it. Quite possibly, the outbreak will fizzle out without causing many deaths, but there is also the possibility that it might become worse. It is not that unusual for deadly flu epidemics to affect the planet. It has already happened at least three times in the last 100 years. The last major deadly flu epidemic (or pandemic) was in 1968. The disease is probably spread the same way as colds and the standard seasonal flu many of us get every year, i.e. by sneezing, coughing near infected people, touching infected surfaces, close contact etc. In other words it probably spreads very easily.

So far, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) 30 people have died; all off the deaths have been in Mexico except one which was in USA. There are however confirmed cases of swine flu emerging from a total 22 countries. If we are to judge by the Mexican statistics (and it is far too early to do so), the death rate seems to be far less than 1 in 10 at 0.03. The problem is that flu afflicts so many people every season that even a low death rate can mean a lot of people die. Flu is already a big cause of death in South Africa, particularly in people with AIDS. What is strange about the outbreak in Mexico is that the majority of dead people were healthy adults between the age of 20 and 50. The WHO is not recommending restriction of travel or closure of borders and stresses that you cannot contract the virus from eating well-cooked pork meat and other pork products. Swine Flu is know largely referred to as H1N1 (influenza A) virus as this is the causative agent.

What should we do?

- We will monitor events and provide new advice as we learn more.
- We strongly encourage you to get a flu vaccination immediately if you have not already done so this year. This will NOT protect you against swine flu. However, it will reduce the risk of you getting other types of flu. This has two benefits: (1) it means you are unlikely to be infected with both swine flu and other types at the same time this season and (2) if you do get flu, it will be easier to discount the possibility that it is just the usual seasonal flu. In any case, you should try to get the flu vaccination every year, especially if you are HIV-positive. Your local pharmacy or GP should be able to you the vaccine. It is safe and very quick (causes a little bit of bruising at the jab point). Otherwise it costs about R60.
- Now is a good time to really put into practice everything we preach about TB infection control. Keep the windows open in taxis and rooms, cover up and turn away from people when you cough and sneeze etc.
- We are preparing a fact sheet, which we will update regularly. Please click here for a fact sheet compiled by the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in the USA on 28 April 2009.
- Click here for the WHO document on H1N1 and HIV infection.
- We have written to the Minister of Health's advisor, asking that the Department of Health form a plan to deal with swine flu in case it hits South Africa.

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