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PSI statement on influenza A (H1N1)- swine flu

On April 29, the World Health Organization (WHO) raised the level of influenza pandemic alert from phase 4 to phase 5, one phase short of **phase 6, the pandemic phase.**

As stated by Margaret Chan, Director General of the WHO, “the declaration of Phase 5 is a strong signal that a pandemic is imminent and that the time to finalize the organization, communication, and implementation of the planned mitigation measures is short.”

Declaration of **Phase 6** would mean a global pandemic is already under way.

The WHO indicated it will be tracking the pandemic at the epidemiological, clinical, and virological levels and recommended that, at this stage:

1. All countries should immediately activate their pandemic preparedness plans. Countries should remain on high alert for unusual outbreaks of influenza-like illness and severe pneumonia.
2. At this stage, effective and essential measures include heightened surveillance, early detection and treatment of cases, and infection control in all health facilities.

By 3 May 2009, 18 countries had officially reported 898 cases of influenza A(H1N1) infection, with 19 confirmed deaths reported in Mexico and one in the United States.

The outbreak of a full global pandemic can still be prevented through decisive implementation of effective measures. Whether a pandemic gets under way and how severe are its consequences if it does, depends on steps taken now.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONS

The outbreak of swine flu poses a great challenge to Public Health authorities, at the global and national level, as well as for unions.

The World Health Organization has played a vital in tracking the outbreak and its spread, supplying tools and providing governments and the general population with accurate and up to date information. Public sector unions and their members are in a unique position to assist in ensuring that the WHO's information and resources reach everywhere they are needed.

PSI's affiliates stand ready to act. Our members in the health sector have been at the epicenter of national responses and their unions have mobilized to support emergency efforts. They all stand ready to provide feedback which can help and improve national efforts, and to extend those efforts globally through PSI. PSI is participating in ILO-coordinated global efforts.

One of the tasks we have undertaken is to organize our affiliates to play a **surveillance role**, both in regards to **spread of the disease** as well as on **violations of workers' rights during the response.**

EFFECTIVE PREVENTION MEASURES MUST BE IMPLEMENTED

In the global and national responses, the protection of the general population must come before any other consideration. Every incident of contagion carries the risk of severe consequences for individuals, including death. But every single infected person also becomes a vector that can spread the disease if adequate steps are not taken to prevent the spread of the virus.

To contain the spread of the epidemic, it is essential that governments implement effective measures to:

1. Detect, isolate and treat infected individuals
2. Reduce the potential of spread by contact with undetected infected individuals.
3. Keep the population well informed about steps they can take to prevent infection, recognize the symptoms of the disease and receive treatment

Workers are at a strategic frontline. Because of the nature of most workplaces, they are at a higher risk of infection. But they can also play a key role in early warning systems and in containing outbreaks, as long as they are properly informed, receive proper training, are provided with adequate protective equipment and their voice is heard.

Unions are the most effective mechanism to organize effective workplace-based detection efforts and responses. Governments should involve trade unions in national action plans. Trade unions have a specific role to play in getting reliable information to workers and already have many thousands of trained health and safety representatives who have a vital role to play.

WORKERS MUST BE PROTECTED

In implementing an effective response, it is essential to take measures to protect health workers. They are the first line of defence in holding the advance of a potential pandemic. They must be in good health in order to fulfil their chosen mission of caring for others, rather than falling victims themselves

Public employees are also at high risk of exposure. Most of them --by the nature of their work, delivering services at central locations with high flow of service recipients--, are exposed to large numbers of diverse people, increasing their chances of contagion.

It is essential that public and private employers prepare for the emergency and that measures are taken to not only protect workers' health but to allow them to receive treatment promptly, effectively and without consequences for their employment.

1. In countries where the flu has been detected, policies must be enacted to prevent infection at the workplace and preparations must be made to ensure the swift treatment of those who suffer contagion. Workplaces can be areas of high infection risk. Employees spend several hours a day in their workplaces, often in close contact with co-workers or, in the service sector, with the people they serve.
2. In countries where there is a risk of the flu spreading, even though it has not been detected, the workplace should be used for education and prevention purposes.
3. Workers should be given the opportunity to protect themselves from the risk of infection. The measures taken by the Mexican government, closing all public offices and schools for several days, are to be applauded. Where risk levels make it necessary, they should be emulated. Mexican private employers have been encouraged to follow suit.
4. Where workers have suffered contagion, measures must be taken to prevent further spread of the virus in their workplace and avoid risk to their co-workers. Workers who fall ill should have immediate access to

treatment. They should be able to focus on their recovery without suffering any consequences to their employment or income.

WHAT THIS HEALTH EMERGENCY REVEALS

The prompt global response is a demonstration of the vital importance of public institutions and in particular, of public health systems. It is at times like these, and on matters of life and death, that the value of public institutions is revealed with pristine clarity.

Emergencies like the one the world is currently facing, vividly demonstrate two critical points that have been at the forefront of global policy debates on the role of the public sector:

1. It is vital for the well-being of all nations to develop and maintain strong institutions for the delivery of public services.
 - **In times of crisis, public health systems and emergency services are the frontline of defence.**
 - Strong, well-coordinated unified public health systems are better suited than fragmented for-profit hospitals to detect the outbreak of an epidemic and organize a response to contain it.
 - During normal times, public health systems are the best means to ensure a healthy population which is less vulnerable to emerging infectious diseases.
2. Global policy initiatives must be aimed at helping all countries **develop strong public institutions**, not undermine them, as the current policies of the IMF and World Bank have. The strength or weaknesses of public institutions in any one country affect all countries, however remote they may be. The quick spread of the H1N1 flu virus, across oceans from North America to Europe and New Zealand, illustrates the fact that in the contemporary reality of global communications and travel, there is no safe haven from the outbreak of a health emergency caused by a contagious agent in any part of the world.

Unfortunately, public institutions have been under siege by the promoters of privatization policies. We are all now facing the consequences. The governments of the countries which are at the epicenter, Mexico and the United States, are applying emergency measures, testing policies and gathering information which need to be shared. Any weaknesses in their responses, especially in the United States, have been primarily a reflection of policies of privatization and reduced public funding for health that hampered the ability of public health institutions to be ready for a crisis of this nature.

Public Services International is a Global Federation of Public Employees Unions. PSI represents over 20 million public employees organized in 650 affiliates in 160 countries. PSI affiliates include 231 union which represent over 7 million health workers.

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