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Pandemic Preparedness at the Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene

In March 2006 Governor Jim Doyle called the Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene (WSLH) “CDC North” at the State’s Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Summit. The Governor’s comment acknowledges what many in the public health community have long known; that Wisconsin is lucky to have a state lab that plays a key role in pandemic preparedness not only in the state, but nationally.

The WSLH was founded in 1903 as the State’s public and environmental health laboratory. A part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, WSLH scientists provide analytical testing, research and education/training in a variety of technical specialties, including infectious diseases (such as influenza), environmental chemistry and microbiology, occupational health, genetics, newborn screening and toxicology.

The WSLH’s role in pandemic preparedness involves four key areas:

Surveillance and Testing – The WSLH coordinates a statewide laboratory-based influenza surveillance program that includes hospital virology labs, plus more than 130 sites that perform rapid tests. The lab-based surveillance data is combined with the WI Division of Public Health’s (DPH) physician-based surveillance program to paint a picture of influenza activity in the state.

In addition to confirming the positive test results reported by lab-based surveillance members, the WSLH also works with DPH on avian influenza surveillance, testing specimens from patients who are suspected of being ill with the H5N1 “avian influenza” virus. The WSLH also tests patient specimens for resistance to the common antiviral medications doctors prescribe to treat seasonal influenza. Since pandemic response plans include the stockpiling of antiviral medications, it’s vital to know if these drugs will work.

Test Method Development – The WSLH helped the CDC gain FDA approval for a genetic-based test method that can identify influenza strains in hours, rather than days. This is an example of many collaborations between the WSLH and CDC.

State and National Pandemic Response Planning – WSLH scientists serve on state and national pandemic preparedness planning committees.

For assistance, contact Jan Klawitter: jan@mail.slh.wisc.edu.

Notes from the Pan Flu Crew

This month, the Trust for America’s Health (TFAH) released the 2008 Ready or Not? public health preparedness report. “Wisconsin scored a perfect 10 out of 10 indicators of preparedness levels,” said Department of Health Services Secretary Karen Timberlake. “Only five states managed to achieve a 10, and it confirms that Wisconsin has never been better prepared to act in an emergency.”

In this issue of the Update, we feature the Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene because we are proud to have such an exemplary laboratory, one that deserves credit for contributing significantly to Wisconsin’s overall public health preparedness. Congratulations to the State Lab and to the thousands of dedicated public health professionals in Wisconsin who are responsible for Wisconsin’s perfect score! For more information on the TFAH report, visit: http://healthyamericans.org.

Spotlight Website: Sesame Street Let’s Get Ready!

The Sesame Workshop presents the Sesame Street Let’s Get Ready project, a resource for families with young children to prepare for an emergency. The site contains videos with Sesame Street characters and an activity book to help children learn about emergency preparedness. Through the videos and activities, children learn things such as how to make an emergency kit and who in their neighborhood to go to for help in an emergency. In addition, parent materials provide advice on talking with children about emergencies.
The Pandemic Preparedness Update is presented bi-monthly by the Wisconsin Division of Public Health. Contact us at: DHSWiPanFlu@wi.gov.

That Iowa Flu Game

It’s not just a board game. It’s not your typical tabletop exercise. That Iowa Flu Game combines the best of both worlds. Designed by staff at the University of Iowa Hygienic Laboratory, the game is a tabletop exercise for pandemic influenza preparedness looked at in a whole new way. Play follows through four modules, each of which includes a scenario and a series of questions designed to spark discussion among the players. The goal of the game is to be the first team to make it around the board and return to "normal" by correctly answering questions.

That Iowa Flu Game comes in three versions for laboratory personnel, public health agency personnel, and the general public. An order form for the game can be obtained at the University of Iowa Hygienic Laboratory website: www.uhl.uiowa.edu.

Question & Answer

Question: How do new influenza viruses come about?

Answer: Influenza viruses are always changing.

- Changes can occur whenever the virus reproduces in those who have influenza.
- The changes can affect how the disease works in the body.

The most common changes are small changes called “drift”.
- Drift is why influenza vaccine is changed every year.
- Scientists are always tracking these changes in the virus.
- Drift usually results in an influenza to which some people have immunity.

Occasionally, large changes occur that produce a pandemic influenza.
- Major changes are called “shift” and can result in a new type of influenza virus or in the re-emergence of an old type of influenza virus.
- Shift is the type of change most likely to cause pandemic influenza.

Submit questions for future issues of the pandemic preparedness update at: DHSWiPanFlu@wi.gov.

Upcoming Events

January 21, 2009: DPH will be reconvening the Antiviral Distribution State Expert Panel. The panel will be charged with reviewing the most recent information on antiviral distribution, such as the new federal guidelines released in December. In addition, panel members will discuss new developments in the areas of:

- Treatment;
- Identifying a distributor;
- Pandemic triggers;
- Reimbursement;
- Public messages;
- Use of the Wisconsin Immunization Registry; and
- Memoranda of Understanding between DPH and treatment centers.

Submit upcoming events for future issues of the pandemic preparedness update to: DHSWiPanFlu@wi.gov.

New Federal Antiviral Guidance Released

The federal government recently released new guidance on the recommended use of antiviral medications in an influenza pandemic. The Wisconsin Division of Public Health will be reviewing the guidance and seeking input from subject matter experts to determine any possible implication for Wisconsin pandemic planning. A link to the new federal guidance can be found at pandemic.wisconsin.gov.

Recent Events

Several Wisconsin state government agencies recently held Badger Flu I, a pandemic continuity of operations exercise. The three-hour exercise was developed by the Continuity of Government organization from the Department of Administration to familiarize agency COOP officials with their pandemic COOP plans and identify opportunities to improve their preparedness.

Since October, Badger Flu I has been conducted at the Office of Justice Assistance, the Office of the Insurance Commissioner, WSLH, the Educational Communications Board, and the Departments of Employee Trust Funds, Justice, Public Instruction, Transportation, and Workforce Development.

Additionally, the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection and the State of Wisconsin Investment Board have conducted customized pandemic COOP exercises at their agencies.

Early in 2009, additional agencies will be conducting Badger Flu I.

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