PANDEMIC FLU

GUIDELINES FOR FUNERAL DIRECTORS

What you need to know and how to protect yourself, your staff and your family
Everyone will be involved in the fight against pandemic influenza (flu) in terms of managing the impact it will have on society and preventing further spread of the infection.

This booklet explains how funeral directors, embalmers and other staff can, in the course of their daily work, protect themselves and their families.

WHAT IS PANDEMIC INFLUENZA?

Influenza (flu) is a familiar infection in the UK, especially during the winter months. The illness, caused by an influenza virus, can be mild or severe and can at times lead to death.

Generally some groups of people are more susceptible than others especially the elderly, young children and people with certain health conditions. This is why the flu vaccination is given to these groups of people every year.

Pandemic flu is different from ordinary flu because it occurs when a new influenza virus emerges into the human population and spreads from person to person worldwide.

As it is a new virus, the entire population will be susceptible because no one will have any immunity to it. Therefore healthy adults as well as the elderly, young children and people with existing medical conditions will be affected. The lack of immunity in the UK population will mean that the virus has the potential to spread very quickly between people. This will result in many more people becoming severely ill and many more deaths.

The circumstances exist now for a new influenza virus to emerge and spread worldwide. Although a pandemic has not yet started, experts warn that it could be soon. It is most likely that the new virus will arise from an avian (bird) flu virus mixing with an ordinary human flu virus and becoming able to infect people.
**SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF INFLUENZA**

**Most significant**
- Fever
- Cough or shortness of breath
- Sudden onset of illness

**Other symptoms**
- Headache
- Malaise
- Chills
- Aching muscles
- Sore throat
- Runny nose, sneezing
- Loss of appetite

**Incubation period (time between contact with the virus and onset of symptoms)**
The range is from one to seven days but for most people it is two to three days.

**Infectious period (how long you are infectious to others)**

**Adults:** from 12 hours before onset of symptoms until about five days after.

**Children:** from 12 hours before onset of symptoms until about seven days after.

It is likely that the signs and symptoms of pandemic flu will be the same as for ordinary flu but they will probably be more severe and cause more serious complications.

**HOW IS PANDEMIC FLU CAUGHT AND SPREAD TO OTHERS?**

It is important to be aware that the influenza virus can **not** be easily spread by contact with cadavers; the virus does not survive for long on the skin and as the dead do not exhale there is no spread from the lungs or airways. People who have died from influenza or its complications are therefore considered low risk in relation to the risk of spreading influenza to others.

Pandemic flu is spread from person to person by close contact. Here are some examples of how this infection can be spread.

- Infected individuals can pass the virus to others through large droplets when coughing, sneezing and even talking within a close distance (usually 3 feet or less).
- The virus can be passed on by direct contact with an infected individual. Shaking or holding hands with an infected individual followed by touching your own mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands with soap and water will also allow the virus to spread to you.
- The influenza virus can be spread when environmental and inanimate objects, such as door handles, light switches and handles on public transport, become contaminated with the virus. Once again, if a person touches these objects and then touches his/her mouth, eyes or nose without first washing their hands with soap and water, their chances of catching the virus are increased.
- In some circumstances, the virus can also be passed on in fine airborne droplets or on dust particles. This is not considered to be a major route of transmission.
WHAT YOU CAN DO TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS FROM PANDEMIC FLU AND OTHER INFECTIONS AT WORK

• Cover your nose and mouth when sneezing and coughing and use disposable single-use tissues for wiping/blowing nose. Dispose of used tissues in nearest waste receptacle.

• Washing your hands after coughing, sneezing, using tissues or contact with respiratory secretions and contaminated objects will reduce the risk of spreading flu to others.

• Wash your hands frequently using soap and water or alcohol hand rub before and after contact with a cadaver.

• Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with contaminated hands (gloved or ungloved).

• Ensure that you are aware of your employer's infection control procedures and that you are following them correctly.

• Use the personal protective equipment (PPE) (gloves and disposable gowns) as directed by your employer, or when there is a risk of contamination with blood and body fluids.

• If collecting a body from a household where you are likely to come into close contact (i.e. within 3 feet) with other people who may have flu, a surgical mask should be worn.

HOW YOU CAN HELP PROTECT YOUR FAMILY AT HOME

You and other members of your family, especially children, are much more likely to be exposed to the influenza virus at school, in the workplace, using public transport or through general contact with other members of the public.

Although you may be working directly with people who have died from pandemic flu, the risk to you at work is much lower than for many members of the general public or healthcare workers because the main route of transmission is by coughing and sneezing. The virus does not survive for long periods on the skin and any risk is further reduced by adherence to your employer's infection control measures and through the use of appropriate protective clothing supplied by your employer.

However, before you leave work, follow these simple, general rules:

• always wash your hands with soap and water and again soon after you arrive home, especially if you are using public transport.

• whilst the appropriate use of personal protective equipment will protect clothes from contamination, during the pandemic you may wish to consider not travelling to and from work in any work clothes in case any of your clothes become contaminated. These work clothes can be washed in a domestic washing machine separately from other items – ideally in a wash temperature of 65-71°C or as hot as the fabric will tolerate. Tumble dry if possible, and then iron. Store and transport in a plastic bag.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO IF YOU HAVE SYMPTOMS OR ARE ILL

If you feel ill whilst at work, report it immediately to your employer. Do not simply carry on working.

If you develop symptoms whilst off duty:

• stay at home. Do not go into work
• phone your employer
• seek advice from NHS Direct on 0845 4647 or your GP.
SPECIFIC ISSUES

Body bags

Body bags are not necessary for cadavers where influenza has been implicated in the death, although they may have a place if it is likely that there would be leakage in transit, or the bodies are otherwise offensive. Bodies cool more slowly inside a body bag, facilitating decomposition and making hygienic preparation more difficult. This may mean that it may only be possible to display the head for viewing causing additional distress to the bereaved.

Laying out

Hygienic preparation of bodies involving washing the face and hands, closing the eyes and mouth, tidying the hair and possibly shaving the face is permissible. This includes plugging orifices to prevent discharges, or covering any wounds.

In some cultures and religious groups, relatives expect to carry out the ritual preparation before burial and, in most cases, this can be permitted but they should be advised to wear gloves and simple protective plastic aprons, also they should be supervised and wash their hands with soap and water afterwards.

Viewing and touching the face is also permitted. However, where a risk of infection other than influenza exists, this will need to be assessed by your employer and appropriate advice given. This may mean only partial preparation and the use of gloves and other protective clothing.

Embalming

Since embalming involves the injection of solutions containing formaldehyde, the risk of infection is reduced for most infectious diseases; influenza is no exception, however, the solution may not penetrate infections mucus in the upper respiratory tract.

The workrooms of funeral parlours must be of a standard acceptable to the Environmental Health Department of the local authority. Staff with skin abrasions, cuts, severe eczema etc., should report this fact to their supervisor and should use impermeable water-proof dressings over the lesions. Staff with uncovered skin lesions or cuts should not work on any body where any infection is likely. Coffins and any body bags used must be leak-proof. Visitors should be subject to the same rules of hygiene and must be supervised if in the workroom.

Environmental procedures/Issues

Body fluids or other contaminated liquids may be discharged into the drainage system, but as far as practical, this should be disinfected before discharge. It should be noted that due to the very high organic load of these liquids, any disinfection process will be of poor quality and should not be relied on. Steps should still be taken to minimise the risk of splashes and droplets, and PPE should be used to protect the face, and to a lesser extent, the body.

All non-liquid waste should be put into ‘hazardous infectious waste’ (yellow) bags, transported and disposed of by incineration or an acceptable licensed company. The Safe management of healthcare waste document from the Department of Health, provides guidance on the implementation of the Hazardous Waste Regulations 2005 and the Environment Agency’s Technical guidance on waste management facilities 2001 contains the guidance on current requirements although its current status is ‘draft out for consultation’.

Controlling the risks of infection at work from human remains: a guide for those involved in funeral services (including embalmers) and those involved in exhumation produced by the Health and Safety Executive, June 2005 is useful guidance to be read in conjunction with this section. This can be accessed at www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web01.pdf.
All instruments should be cleaned using warm (not hot) water and detergents. Running water should not be used as it facilitates splashing. Instruments should then be disinfected according to your employer's infection control policy.

All spills of blood or other body fluids should be cleaned up promptly. Protective clothing should be worn (gloves and plastic apron). Any blood spill should be soaked up by using hypochlorite granules¹ and the spillage and disinfectant mopped up promptly with disposable paper towels. The granules or towels should be scraped/soaked up and placed in a yellow, clinical waste bag. The area should then be cleaned with general purpose detergent and hot water. For general cleaning of the environment, a general purpose detergent and hot water is preferred. Hypochlorite should not be used in the presence of formaldehyde as there is evidence that hypochlorites can react with formaldehyde to produce a potent carcinogen. An absorbent substance without hypochlorite should be used.

Any action that will bring a staff member’s hands or gloves into contact with their face whilst undertaking an embalming procedure should be avoided and strict banning of eating, smoking or drinking must be enforced within work areas.

YOUR BUSINESS MAY WORK DIFFERENTLY DURING THE PANDEMIC

During a flu pandemic your business may work in a different way from how it works now. It is likely that there will be a larger number of deaths than usual over a fairly short period of time and therefore cemeteries or crematoria may be working much longer hours to keep up with the likely demand. There may be staff shortages due to illness in employees and their families.

¹Chlorine is corrosive to metals and will react with formaldehyde. When chlorine-releasing granules come into contact with urine, chlorine fumes may be released which may lead to respiratory problems.

BEING PREPARED

Knowing what to do

It is a virtual certainty that if a flu pandemic starts, it will eventually affect the UK. Currently, all local authorities are developing plans and preparing to deal with the large numbers of cadavers that may require burial or cremation.

This might involve special storage facilities for cadavers or for crematoria or cemeteries to operate on an extended or 24-hour basis.

You can be prepared by knowing what to do and by becoming familiar with your employer’s health, safety and handling procedures.

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) regulations must be followed at all times.

• Above all else you must observe strict personal hygiene
• The risk of infection from cadavers affected by pandemic flu is low and is usually prevented by the use of strict infection control procedures such as the use of appropriate protective clothing
• A body bag should only be considered if there is leakage of body fluids
• Hygienic preparation of the body is permitted
• If the body is being collected from home and other occupants of the house or relatives are unwell, then a surgical mask should be worn
• The body can be handled; viewing and touching is allowed
• Embalming may be carried out in the normal way
• Remember the signs and symptoms of influenza and if you are ill whilst at home, do not go into work. Telephone your supervisor
• If you become ill whilst on duty, do not carry on working. Inform your manager immediately