

## Social Implications of a Human Influenza Pandemic<sup>1</sup>

A pandemic – whether severe or moderate – is likely to have significant social implications, including for routine coping mechanisms within communities where social networks are often an important factor in the survival mechanisms of vulnerable or disadvantaged groups.

### Health care systems overwhelmed

- The impact of a pandemic on a country's health care services is likely to be intense, sustained and nation-wide. Most health care systems are likely to be quickly overwhelmed as a result of:
  - a dramatic surge in the number of patients with influenza and its direct complications
  - the particular needs for high dependency care<sup>2</sup> and infection control facilities and equipment (e.g. respirators)
  - a secondary burden on health status caused by anxiety and bereavement
  - reduced number of health workers and informal carers, due to the direct or indirect effects of flu on themselves and their families
  - logistical problems due to disruption of supplies, utilities and transport as part of the general disruption caused by the pandemic
  - delays in dealing with other medical conditions
  - the longer term macro effects of the pandemic on the national and world economy.
- Care for non-acute health problems would be sharply curtailed.
- New approaches might be adopted to many aspects of health care, including staffing, triaging of patients and coping with those patients needing more intense care than is normally possible at home but who may be unable to be admitted to hospital.

### Impact on schools and other institutionalized communities

- Many schools would close, and even if they did not, attendance would fall dramatically as many parents would keep their children at home.
- Closing schools would have a significant impact on business continuity and maintenance of essential services (including health care), due to parent workers needing to stay at home for childcare.
- Influenza is likely to spread rapidly in other closed communities such as residential care facilities, orphanages, barracks and prisons.

### Social distancing

- People would “quarantine” themselves and their families by staying at home more. They would avoid as much as possible public places, such as markets, community centers, places of worship, and public transportation.

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<sup>1</sup> These insights are gleaned from a cross-section of AHI-related literature. No specific literature on the social implications of a pandemic has been located.

<sup>2</sup> High dependency care refers to care provided to a patient who requires closer observation and monitoring than is usually provided. Many patients with influenza will require high dependency care.

Disruption of key social services

- In the case of a severe pandemic, high rates of absenteeism – due to fear, illness, and the need to care for children or sick relatives – could result in sudden and potentially significant shortages of personnel to provide essential social services.

Infrastructural system failure

- In the case of a severe pandemic, in some countries there might be a rapid breakdown of critical infrastructural services such as power, water, and transportation.

Key policy issues

- What would be the impact of a pandemic on **vulnerable individuals and groups**, in different settings?
- Would a pandemic generate **new vulnerabilities**, or would it reinforce existing ones?

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