

Swine flu preparedness – Departmental Teaching

Advice suggests that we are likely to see a high level of pandemic (H1N1) illness this autumn and winter. This paper sets out some relatively straightforward action that might be taken to minimise the impact of such illness on teaching.

Background assumptions

Current estimates suggest that up to 30% of the adult population (and 50% of children) will contract H1N1 over the period of the pandemic. We do not suppose that there is anything we can do to reduce this proportion. Nonetheless, Departments have a responsibility not to do anything that will speed up the *rate* of infection. For the majority of sufferers, swine flu is no worse than the usual seasonal flu, but individuals with underlying conditions and those who are pregnant are at high risk from the disease: reducing the rate of infection gives them the best chance of avoiding the disease, and will also reduce the load on support staff in colleges and in the care services.

As well as those staff who are actually ill, there are likely to be others who cannot work because they are caring for ill family members.

Aims

Against that background, Departmental objectives should be as follows:

1. To take such sensible precautions to minimise, as far as possible, the spread of the disease in order, in particular, to protect vulnerable individuals;
2. To preserve, as far as possible, the normal business of teaching;
3. To ensuring that affected students are not directly penalized in consequence of missing lectures and/or practical work.

Approaches

Reducing transmission

From students: Colleges have been given and have issued clear guidance about what students should do if they have symptoms which are consistent with the H1N1 virus. Such students should self-isolate in their rooms and should certainly not attend lectures or practicals. Departments might reinforce this with regular emails to the class. In an attempt to persuade “the walking wounded” to stay away, Departments might:

- where consistent with current practice, ensure lecture and other material is made available on-line in a timely way;
- for those subjects with practicals, consider what can be done to reassure students that there will be no penalties for those who miss a practical because of genuine illness. If there is a compulsory minimum level of attendance, an email or letter

from DoS or Tutor to the Head of Class explaining any absence should suffice to allow relaxation of this minimum.

From staff: It has been suggested that the main problem will be “presenteeism”, rather than absenteeism. The Cambridge ethos is very much one of struggling in to give a lecture, even if you feel absolutely terrible. In this instance, Departments should actively discourage such bravery. We do not want infected lecturers struggling in and then coughing all over a lecture theatre of 300 students.

Lecturers are likely to feel under pressure to continue, primarily because they wish to cover all the material for the exams. This pressure might be reduced by:

- where possible, having substitute lecturers on call;
- encouraging lecturers to have handouts and other lecture material prepared well in advance, so that students can catch up by themselves in the case of one or two missed lectures;
- ensuring that examiners are prepared to replace questions on the last part of the course if it becomes clear it was not taught.

Preserving normal teaching

Another risk to normal teaching is that key support will be absent, and that (for example) lecture theatres and practical classes cannot be unlocked, or that coursework due on a particular day cannot in fact be handed in or collected. Departments might consider what backup arrangements can be put in place, in particular for managing practical classes on “changeover” days when one experiment has to be removed and another set out.

Missed lectures should not be a problem for most students. Turnout at lectures is never 100 percent and it seems reasonable for a student who misses one or two weeks of lectures to expect to make it up through their supervisions, using the lecture notes, and possibly input from others who did attend.

Arrangements are already in place through Diane Rainsbury, Secretary of the Applications Committee, for extension of deadlines for dissertations and other major pieces of assessed work should students find that their work has been disrupted.

Education Section
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