

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE SWINE FLU EPIDEMIC

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As the swine flu epidemic appears to be abating it is worthwhile to pause and look at some of the lessons the H1N1 or the Swine flu virus has left for us. There is no question that the number of people visiting doctors' clinics with influenza like illness in August has dropped significantly compared to the same period in July. However, recent tests confirm that the virus is still circulating, though in drastically reduced way, and it may continue to circulate at low levels as we approach the end of the year.

The biggest surprise from the swine flu that swept the country was the huge surge of visits to the doctors' rooms and the general outpatients at Tupua Tamasese Meaole (TTM) Hospital. This led to the creation of the semi-open air clinic in Apia, which saw a large number of people, both adults and children, sick with flu symptoms, all assuming of course by symptoms alone that they were having Swine flu. A major planning focus by the Samoa Ministry of Health (MOH) for the future is to avoid being swamped by a similar, possibly bigger demand for emergency room and doctors' room visits.

Border control measures undertaken by the MOH obviously did not stop the H1N1 virus from slipping undetected into the country. The main reason is the majority of people carrying the virus had no symptoms when they arrived at the airport (that is they were carrying the virus without being sick, which is technically referred to as the incubation period). Furthermore the majority of cases were so mild that infected people were mingling freely within the community and transmitting the virus without being aware of it. This is obviously an issue for agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO) in regards to how to detect similar viruses in people infected but where they have not quite developed the usual symptoms. The concern now is - how do we prepare for the next wave of the swine flu virus which experts are predicting will be more virulent? It won't necessarily occur in the next 6 months, in fact it might be a couple of years, but it will return. If we look at the history of new strains of influenza virus which appeared on the scene in the last 150 years almost all of them had a second wave.

The Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 which killed a quarter of the Samoan population was actually the second wave. The first recorded influenza minor epidemic actually occurred in the 1830's which archives showed was brought in by one of the crew members on board the Rev. John Williams boat. Fortunately, through the foresight and wisdom of the missionary in recognizing the symptoms early, quarantining the sailor and burying him at sea stopped what could have been a catastrophic epidemic. There are no records to show how many Samoans got sick or died, but there was definitely a minor influenza outbreak.

Closure of schools by the MOH was the right thing to do at the time but there is no evidence from Samoa or abroad to show that this intervention can actually curb an epidemic although there is evidence from the USA which suggests banning large gatherings can prevent the transmission of the virus. Wearing of masks and hand washing are the two solid ways that have been shown to prevent the virus transmission.

There are currently trials in the USA to test the new H1N1 vaccine and it may be another couple of months before it is available. It is expected that cost will be an issue; however the MOH should seriously look at stockpiling this vaccine once it is available and of course a lot of Tamiflu tablets. The second wave would definitely be deadlier.