

EXECUTIVE STATEMENT

TO ALLAY PUBLIC CONCERNS REGARDING H1N1 INFLUENZA IN KZN, 31 JULY 2019

Madam Speaker
Honourable Premier
Colleagues in the Executive Council
Members of this House

The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health has been inundated with calls from schools and parents expressing concern that their children – or other people that they know - are infected with influenza A (H1N1). Considerable alarm and panic have been fuelled by media reports following the demise of a 9 year-old girl from Pietermaritzburg. The little girl had displayed flu-like symptoms, but her case was Not confirmed because no samples were taken by the doctor.

As part of precautions, and to aid the investigation process by the Department, the girl's sibling tested positive for influenza A (H1N1), and has recovered and been discharged. The children's grandmother, who also had to be hospitalised, has recovered but her test results are currently outstanding.

The flu season in South Africa occurs in the winter, usually between May and July. Flu can be easily spread from person to person. There are three different strains that can cause seasonal flu in humans. They are called influenza A(H1N1), influenza A(H3N2) and influenza B. All three strains are not reportable as Influenza is not a notifiable medical condition.

The pandemic influenza A (H1N1) virus, which appeared for the first time in 2009 causing a global influenza pandemic, is now a seasonal influenza virus that becomes prevalent in winter, and co-circulates with other seasonal viruses. It is neither a notifiable nor a reportable disease, and is thus being treated as a normal flu. Vaccines and treatment are available to treat flu. The department of Health therefore does not keep statistics on influenza.

Generally, population groups who may be vulnerable to influenza and need vaccination before the influenza season include pregnant women at all stages of pregnancy; HIV-infected individuals; and adults or children under six who might have underlying medical conditions.

As a Department, we are calling on all responsible authorities at the different schools, doctors, as well as members of the community to exercise restraint, because by referring to an outbreak without being absolutely sure, we may begin to create unnecessary panic and alarm, which helps no-one.

We are advising parents to be on the look-out for certain signs of severe influenza. Those who display worrying signs such as chest pain or shortness of breath are strongly advised to seek medical attention. If any individuals think they or their children may be suffering from an aggressive type of influenza, they must visit the nearest healthcare facility.

The Department is emphasizing the following:

- There is no outbreak
- Avoid using the incorrect terminology, such as “swine flu”, as this refers to a disease in pigs
- Do not panic
- Keep calm
- This is a seasonal flu

Since, the emergence of these media reports with led to panic around this issue, the department has issued a fact sheet from the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) for parents and caregivers. This notice provided advice on influenza to the following role players to share widely to quell the panic:

- School health
- Health promotions
- Department of Education
- Schools

Guidelines on influenza have been circulated to all Health care workers/facilities and are also available on the Department’s intranet.

All districts are currently completing flu vaccines to the high risk groups:

- Pregnant women – irrespective of stage of pregnancy
- HIV-infected persons
- Adults or children at high risk for influenza-related complications because of underlying medical conditions
- All persons aged ≥ 65 years and Residents of old-age (nursing) homes)

Receipt of influenza vaccination is the most effective way to prevent influenza. The vaccine is best administered before the annual influenza season starts (March-June)

but there is no contra-indication to receiving it later in the year. The current influenza season is not over, and vaccination may still be of value.

For those who have not, or will not, be receiving a vaccine, the Department is therefore advocating the following steps to be taken by parents and caregivers to reduce the spread of flu.

- We advise that children be taught Not to share drinks, food or unwashed utensils;
- They must be taught to cover their coughs and sneezes with tissues or alternatively their elbow when tissues are unavailable, and to discard their tissues appropriately;
- They must get into the habit of washing their hands often, with soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand rub.
- We also strongly recommend that they know the signs and symptoms of the flu, which include fever (temperature above 37.8 degrees Celsius and feeling hot or cold), runny or stuffy nose, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, and feeling very tired. Some people may also have diarrhoea and vomit, which is more common among children.
- It is extremely important that sick children be kept at home so that they do not spread the flu to others. It is strongly recommended that such children stay home for at least 24 hours after resolution of symptoms. This will reduce the number of people who may get infected.
- Parents are also urged to ensure that their sick children drink plenty of fluids and get lots of rest.
- Any child who is determined to be sick while at school must be sent home.
- If parents are worried about their children's illness, we strongly recommend that they take them to a clinic or doctor early.

Members of this House are informed that the KZN Department of Health has the situation under control, and there is absolutely no need to panic, as H1N1 is now regarded as a normal flu. There are vaccines and treatment options available to the public. In addition to distributing information, education and communication material to public, the Department is currently engaged in a process to use mass media to disseminate messages concerning H1N1 influenza, in order to keep the public adequately informed.

I therefore table this report and thank you for the opportunity.