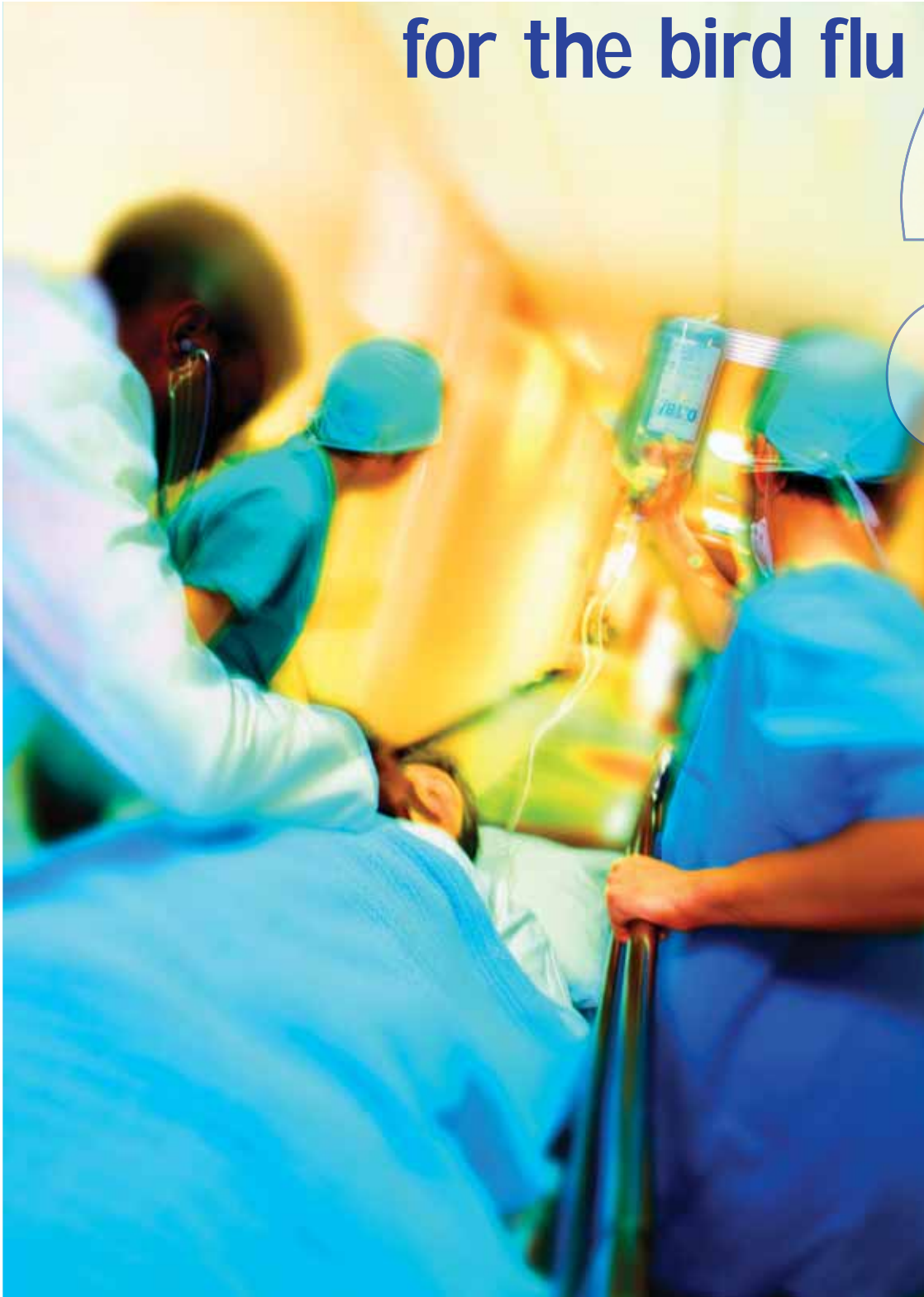


IS YOUR STATE READY for the bird flu



*State Officials
Should Be Asking
Questions About
Preparedness*

The Council of State Governments held a conference in March to help legislators figure out what questions they should be asking about their state's preparedness plans for pandemic outbreaks.

By Jennifer Ginn



Sen. Kevin Coughlin of Ohio attended CSG's conference on preparing for pandemic outbreaks.

Imagine your state legislature is in session during the middle of a pandemic flu outbreak.

A third of your staff is absent because they or their family members are sick. Essential services like water and garbage pickup are falling by the wayside due to sick workers. Hospitals are filled past capacity and essential medical supplies, such as ventilators, are in short supply.

What do you do?

Those were just some of the questions facing a group of about 30 legislators in March during the Policy Forum on Pandemic Readiness and Emergency Preparedness, conducted by The Council of State Governments through educational support from Roche Laboratories.

What Is Pan Flu?

The forum took legislators through a simulation of situations they might encounter in the event of a pandemic caused by the H5N1 virus, also known as bird or avian flu. Pandemics are global epidemics that can spread across a country and around the world in a short period of time. The last severe pandemic was caused by the Spanish flu in 1918 and killed 20 million to 40 million people worldwide, including 675,000 people in the United States.

Bird flu has become a concern for health officials because of its possibility to spark the next pandemic. Since 2003, nearly 400 human cases of bird flu have been confirmed worldwide, primarily in Asia. More than 60 percent of those cases were fatal. People are mainly infected with the virus through close contact with infected birds. The only thing that has kept it from becoming a pandemic is that, so far, it is not spread easily from one human to another.

Whether it's caused by the bird flu or by something else, a pandemic in the near future is inevitable, said Dr. Stuart Weiss, founding partner and CEO of MedPrep Consulting Group LLC, who ran the simulation at the conference.

"Statistically, there's a pandemic every 10 to 49 years, with the average being about 25," Weiss said. "... In the next nine

years, we've got a really good chance of having one. This just needs to be part of the things you think about. This is not going to be something you can do at the last minute.

"The biggest problem with a pandemic is you lose 30 to 40 percent of your people due to sickness. How do you maintain business? How do you maintain the functioning of government? ... In some states, you have to be physically in the chamber to vote. If you're in a pandemic, you're not going to want to do that. If you don't start planning how to run a virtual government now, when a pandemic comes, you're really going to be in trouble."

Questions Policymakers Should Be Asking

The problem with planning for a pandemic, Weiss said, is that it affects so many segments of society. The wide-ranging effects raise many questions covering topics such as when to close schools or share information with the public, how to distribute limited medical resources and who will get antiviral medication to prevent infection.

There's also a host of other questions government should answer before a pandemic starts, Weiss said, including those involving how to keep government going, how to protect constituents and issues with crafting emergency health powers acts.

"... All disaster plans need to be tweaked over time. It's never OK to write a plan, let it sit on the shelf and collect dust," Weiss said. "Consider in this we will have 20, 30, 40 percent absenteeism. It's going to take out a lot of people, make them sick and take them out of work. You're going to have a shortage of people in essential positions to keep things going."

Even legislators who have been deeply involved in planning for an emergency have discovered holes in their state's plans. Assemblywoman Joan Quigley has been a member of the New Jersey Legislature for 15 years. As a hospital administrator at Hoboken University

For more information about bird flu and pandemic preparedness, visit:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/>
- The Center for Law & The Public's Health model state public health laws:
<http://www.publichealthlaw.net/Resources/Modellaws.htm>
- Trust for America's Health:
<http://www.pandemicfluandyou.org/>
- PandemicFlu.gov:
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/>
- World Health Organization:
http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/index.html

Medical Center, across the Hudson River from Manhattan, she saw firsthand the havoc wreaked by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Her hospital treated 1,000 patients from the World Trade Center. Shortly thereafter, New Jersey began planning for disasters.

“We looked at it from every angle. We looked at all the laws that got in our way,” Quigley said. “But we looked primarily at it from a first responder point of view because that’s the experience we had. We have an emergency plan in the Department of Health in New Jersey, but I haven’t seen it.”

Now, Quigley said she’ll ask to see the emergency plan.

“I think you have to start with the ‘what ifs.’ You have to sit down and ask people, ‘What do you do if this happens?’ A lot of the time, the answer may be ‘We don’t know,’” Quigley said. “That’s not acceptable.”

Rep. Anastasia Pittman of Oklahoma said her state is in much the same shape as New Jersey.

“We have an organization that focuses on being prepared and planning in case of terrorism, but we have not coordinated all of our agencies, legislators and executive officials for pandemic readiness,” Pittman said. “It became quite apparent to me that we’ve got to work on our emergency protocols, such as the continuity of government, the ethical standards that come along with that and the roles and responsibilities of local legislators.”

Sen. Kevin Coughlin of Ohio, who chairs the Health, Human Services and Aging Committee, believes his state is about 75 percent prepared for a pandemic. For instance, the state has ordered a stockpile of antiviral medication—which could be used to treat victims and keep people from getting sick—but there is no place in the state to store it yet. Ohio has not yet completed plans to handle a pandemic, according to Coughlin.

And the number of questions all legislators need to be asking themselves, he said, is staggering.

“First of all, an easy one is do you have your supply of antivirals?” Coughlin said. “Do you have a formal coordinated plan between federal, state and local governments? Do you have an inventory of drugs, medical equipment and manpower to meet the worst-case scenario? What’s your plan for getting information to the public?”

“Our plans aren’t completed yet. Maybe it’s just one of those things that is always in progress.”

Growing Tired of Being Afraid

Weiss said even though the threat of a pandemic is still high, people are tired of hearing about it. Five years ago, newspapers were filled with stories about how states and people should be prepared for a pandemic. Now, Americans are paying attention to other things.

“People are just getting tired of hearing about disasters,” Weiss said. “There’s some psychological (studies) out there that looked at how many things people can be afraid of at the same time. For most people, there are a limited number of things you can be afraid of at one time.

“... When I tell my friends I’m working on pandemics, they say, ‘God, that’s still around? We thought that was fixed already.’ For the average person and the average constituent, they aren’t hearing about it and it’s off their radar. The problem is the virus doesn’t read the paper.”

Coughlin said he agrees the public isn’t that interested in pandemic preparedness anymore. But that still doesn’t change his responsibilities as a legislator, he said.

“People tell me this is never going to happen,” Coughlin said. “The second thing people tell me is that this is the kind of thing that happens in Asia. Where did the 1918 flu start? Kansas”

—Jennifer Ginn is an education policy analyst at *The Council of State Governments*.



Is Your State Ready for a Pandemic?

Here are just a few of the questions legislators and other policymakers may want to consider when developing an emergency preparedness plan.

- n Does your state allow the legislature to hold votes if legislators are not at the capitol? During a pandemic, policymakers may need to conduct sessions using a telephone or computer connection.
- n How will antiviral medication be distributed in the event of an outbreak?
- n Will some key personnel receive antiviral medication to keep them from being infected? If so, who are the key personnel?
- n How will your state handle the shortage of bed space at hospitals? Dr. Stuart Weiss, founding partner and CEO of MedPrep Consulting Group LLC, estimates the country will need four times as many regular hospital beds and twice as many intensive care beds than currently available during a pandemic.
- n How will your state deal with the likely shortage of doctors, nurses and other hospital staff?
- n How will information be shared with the public? Will it come from a central agency within the government or will legislators take part in sharing the information with their districts?