



joint guideline

Influenza Pandemic

Introduction

This joint guideline from the Australian Nursing Federation and Royal College of Nursing, Australia aims to inform members and other nurses about their role in the preparation for, and management of, an influenza pandemic in Australia, and to list available resource material. As frontline health workers and as community members, nurses may be called on to give care and advice in a pandemic situation.

In the event of an influenza pandemic there are effective measures that governments, organisations and individuals can take to help prevent or slow the spread of influenza, minimise its impact and manage recovery. The recently revised Australian Government's *National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic* is available at: <http://www.pmc.gov.au/publications/pandemic/index.cfm>. In addition, nurses need to be aware of State/Territory legislation and emergency plans that may be in place. This information should be available through health service organisations.

In a severe pandemic the virus may spread rapidly; vaccines, antiviral agents and antibiotics to treat secondary infections may be in short supply, and it may take several months before a vaccine becomes generally available; health care services may be stressed, with sudden and potentially significant shortages of personnel available to provide essential community services due to widespread illness; and the effect of influenza on individual communities may be sustained over a long period of time. Planning for preparedness will reduce the effects of a pandemic, should it occur. Pandemic planning requires that health professionals, health service providers and communities work together to form a coordinated response.

Nurses will take a lead role in the treatment and care of the community in the event of an influenza pandemic in Australia. Nurses form the single largest component of the health professional workforce and work across all healthcare settings, geographical boundaries, across the 24 hour cycle every day of the year. It is therefore vital that nurses be aware of their role and professional and ethical issues which may arise for themselves, some of which are outlined below. It is also important that nurses be able to assist in disseminating correct information to the public.

Role of nurses in preparing for an influenza pandemic

- Assisting with development of local pandemic plans
- Maintaining current knowledge of signs and symptoms of influenza
- Maintaining up to date knowledge of personal protection equipment and its use

Role of nurses in an influenza pandemic

- Providing the first health care contact for the general public in most cases
- Enacting local pandemic plans
- Assisting with containment measures
- Keeping up to date with information on the global spread of influenza
- Making early identification of people suspected of having influenza and separating these people from others, as required
- Triaging in a range of settings such as general practices, community health care centres and local hospitals

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- Dealing with large numbers of people, some of whom may be the 'worried well'
- Being aware that normal work patterns/roles and staff responsibilities may not apply, including that nurses not currently working in clinical roles may be called on to do so
- Recognising that there may be increased staff absences for a variety of reasons, including personal illness, fear of contamination, provision of care and support to ill family or household members, isolation or quarantine requirements, the need to care for children unable to attend schools or child care centres during closures, or revised transport arrangements
- Managing vaccinations
- Accessing personal protection equipment
- Assessing people entering Australia who show signs or symptoms of influenza
- Educating 'non-clinical' staff
- Taking all possible and appropriate precautions to prevent infection of self
- Complying with all infection control and Occupational Health and Safety precautions as deemed appropriate in the circumstances

Role of nurses in clinical care areas during a pandemic:

- Providing front line care
- Caring for patients with influenza as well as maintaining other services, such as trauma and emergency services, birthing facilities, palliative care, renal dialysis, and cancer services
- Dealing with large numbers of people in overcrowded facilities
- Strictly adhering to infection control practices, and ensuring that others maintain these practices

Role of nurses in community and primary health care:

- Educating the public about hand hygiene and cough etiquette
- Allaying fears
- Ensuring social isolation of people with evident symptoms
- Being aware that there may be a heightened role for general practice nurses and community nurses, including home visits

Role of nurses in informing the public:

- Peak nursing organisations communicating information to nurses
- Informing the public of correct information to dispel hysteria generated by sensationalist reporting of news by the popular media

Other issues for consideration by the nursing profession

Ethical dilemmas faced by nurses:

- Prioritising care for patients with influenza over those with other conditions
- Balancing family and work responsibilities
- Assessing one's own infectious status for fitness to practice, that is, not working if infectious
- Placing oneself at risk of infection to assist others

Attendance at work during a pandemic:

- Being aware that nurses may be directed to attend work and to stay on the premises throughout the duration of the pandemic, subject to emergency plans (this may not be a legal obligation)
- Knowing that there is a duty of care of the work place to look after staff
- Recognition by health service providers that many nurses have family obligations that may have a high priority in such emergency situations

Vaccination:

- Being prepared for debates about which members of the public should be vaccinated
- Being aware that vaccine may not be available at the onset of pandemic, or for several weeks/months until it is developed; that there will be limited supplies of vaccines; and that governments will prioritise distribution and use of such vaccines/treatments

Awareness of Millennium Development Goals:

- Needing to be aware of the progress on the Millennium Development Goals. In countries where poverty exists, where water supplies are limited, and there are low levels of education, there is huge potential for infection to occur, and to spread rapidly. The profession will work with governments to assist our colleagues in neighbouring countries, wherever possible.

Maintenance of low level vigilance:

- Maintaining low level vigilance, and insisting that basic infection control measures (standard precautions) are practiced at all times.

For further information:

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, (2008) Guideline: The responsibilities of nurses and midwives in the event of a declared national emergency. Available from: www.anmc.org.au

Commonwealth of Australia (2009) National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic Available from: <http://www.pmc.gov.au/publications/pandemic/index.cfm>

Commonwealth of Australia (2008) Australian health management plan for pandemic influenza. Available from: <http://www.flupandemic.gov.au/internet/panflu/publishing.nsf>. This website includes a range of information about influenza including frequently asked questions, and fact sheets.

Royal Australian College of General Practitioners Pandemic flu kit. Available at: <http://www.racgp.org.au/pandemicresources>

Australian Homeland Security Research Centre: <http://www.homelandsecurity.org.au/>

World Health Organization website: <http://www.who.int/en/>

International Council of Nurses website: <http://www.icn.ch>