

Pandemic poses a twist for emergency planners

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In March of 2003, a disease called SARS made its way to Toronto, shutting down hospital emergency rooms and old age homes, wreaking havoc on airport security and slowing the economy. But SARS offered just a glimpse of what could face businesses and institutions in the case of a world-wide disease outbreak.

SARS was considered an epidemic, but researchers warn the world is facing a pandemic, and businesses should take this into account in their emergency plans.

Is your worksite ready for a pandemic? A pandemic is a widespread outbreak of highly-infectious illness – usually assumed to be influenza. And history and scientific opinion say it's not a matter of 'if' a pandemic will occur, but 'when'. Companies need to be prepared, but planning for a pandemic has many distinct differences from a typical emergency response plan.

Businesses in Ontario have experienced their share of man-made and natural disasters over the last ten years. Ice storms, massive power outages, and 9/11 have all disturbed or halted normal day-to-day business activities. While learning from these experiences has helped shape many emergency response plans (ERPs), the disasters have often been either regional or technology-based. The incidents are short-term, people are generally fine (if not missing certain amenities) and outside help is readily available.

The duration, severity and spread of a pandemic present a whole new set of challenges for emergency planning. It is nearly inevitable the next pandemic will be a worldwide event. It will present a human-resources problem for worksites, as opposed to the typical technological and safety risks that occur during natural disasters.

Up to 50 per cent of the workforce may be absent at the height of a pandemic. Under the Emergency Management Act, employees are entitled to a protected leave if the government declares an emergency. And if the absentee rate at your workplace is high, chances are it's the same with your suppliers, transporters and consumers.

Unlike natural disasters, which last for seconds in the case of earthquakes or 12 hours in the case of a severe snowstorm, the lifespan of a pandemic is 12-18 months. The speed at which



A nurse at Sunnybrook and Women's Hospital in Toronto wears the protective clothing used when treating patients with atypical pneumonia (SARS). The illness spread in Toronto and other parts of Canada in March 2003, leading to quarantines, hospital staff shortages, and international concern. Photo by Kevin Frayer/THE CANADIAN PRESS. Used with permission.

the pandemic will spread is expected to be enhanced due to significantly increased air travel in the last 50 years.

Some key steps to take in preparing a pandemic plan are:

- Identify core people, core skills and core supplies needed to maintain business operations. Develop back-up plans – train people to fill in for key roles, look for alternate suppliers.
- Plan for large absences – ensure sick leave policies and other human resource policies are up to date. Consider ways for some employees such as office staff to work from home.
- Protect staff health – provide information now about preventing the spread of illness, and plan ways to limit the spread during a pandemic.
- Prepare for communication and knowledge management – establish ways to communicate messages to workers, suppliers and others. Locate reliable sources for pandemic information.

Mining operations will need to consider whether it's possible to continue operating safely if certain employees or supplies are missing. For example, if there is no one to make repairs to equipment, is it safe to continue operating? What is the minimum number of mine rescue volunteers able to report for duty at an underground mine?

The good news is the influenza virus can be inactivated with warm water and soap. Policies encouraging personal hygiene and a clean workplace will help reduce the spread of influenza at work. The virus can rest on surfaces for 24-48 hours. Regular cleaning of common use areas like lunchrooms will help keep the virus in check. A plan should keep in mind that it may be difficult to find cleaning staff during a pandemic and people at the worksite may need to be assigned the task. Cleaning supplies such as hand sanitizer and alcohol-based cleaning products should be purchased before the outbreak of a pandemic as supplies may be difficult to find during a pandemic.

Hand washing will be vital to promoting health among employees during a pandemic. Signs should be posted to encourage frequent and proper hand washing. The virus enters the human body through the nose, eyes and mouth. Employees should be reminded to avoid touching these areas with their hands and to cover their nose and mouth when they sneeze.

There are many resources available for companies preparing a pandemic plan. The World Health Organization, Health Canada and the Centres for Disease Control in the United States all maintain complete pandemic web sites.

Two additional sources are:

- Influenza Pandemic: Continuity Planning Guide for Canadian Business at: http://www.cme-mec.ca/pdf/CME_Pandemic_Guide.pdf
- Pandemic planning web site including information for home, community and workplace: <http://www.ccohs.ca/pandemic/>