

## Health officials say strike hindering swine-flu work

With pandemic planning on hold, some wonder if city will be ready for more serious outbreak

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Public health officials are concerned that the Toronto civic workers' strike is hobbling pandemic planning efforts for the fall, when it's feared swine flu may get worse.

"There is no doubt in my mind (that) this is a very inopportune time to have a strike. In terms of pandemic planning, we have a lot of work to do and this will hinder that work," said Dr. Michael Gardam, director of infectious disease prevention and control for the Ontario Agency for Health Promotion and Protection.

Ontario's 36 public health units are – or should be – in the process of planning for the establishment of mass vaccination and flu assessment centres in the fall. While the province has not given the final word on whether these centres will open, public health units have been ordered to make plans.

Toronto has seen the most H1N1 influenza virus activity of any public health unit in the province. According to the latest numbers, the city has had 1,328 of the province's 3,154 cases. There are 21 patients with the virus in Toronto hospitals.

Dozens of front-line staff from Toronto Public Health are now on the picket line. They include nurses, epidemiologists, health promotion consultants and data-entry administrators – staff who would normally be involved in setting up these centres, as well as "contact tracing" to determine how the infection is moving from person to person.

"There is still so much work to be done, so you can imagine that if we do have a strike for a long period, it's not going to be helpful," Gardam said.

Flu assessment centres would be open to those who think they might have the virus. Individuals would be assessed by health professionals who could dispense antiviral medication, which must be taken within 48 hours of getting symptoms.

"You may not get the drug to people within 48 hours. Public response isn't going to be as good as you'd like it to be," Gardam said.

Public health units normally set up vaccination clinics for regular seasonal flu, but this year they will have to do three times as much work because Ontarians are being urged to also get an H1N1 vaccination and H1N1 booster.

"We've got lots to do, man. We've got to sort out these things. Having a plan on paper is not the same as operationalizing it."

A source with the city who is not on strike agrees with Gardam's concerns.

"What if it (virus) changes and we're not on top of it?" the source said, adding that managers have been working 12- to 14-hour days and are getting burned out.

Even educational efforts have been hampered, the source said, noting that posters offering tips on handwashing and sneezing into your sleeve have not been sent to summer camps as planned.

There have been 77,000 confirmed cases of the virus worldwide so far. There is concern it could mutate and cause more serious illness. Genetic mutations resistant to antiviral medication have already been found in Japan and Denmark.