

**Transcript of the Press Conference undertaken with
Dr Keiji Fukuda, Assistant Director-General ad. Interim for
Health Security and Environment
World Health Organization
26 April 2009**

The first thing is that we will be giving regular meeting with the press on a daily basis and this is the first of those meetings. We know that the need for information is very great and we hope to help fill that gap by meeting with you every day. First I shall start by setting the context of what we are thinking about and what we are facing and then I will go into some of the specifics of what we know right now, and then we shall also provide some information about some of the actions which are being taken and then we shall take questions.

Many of you know that the world has been talking about and preparing for pandemic influenza for at least the past five years and there are a number of reasons for this. We know that influenza pandemics have occurred at least a couple of times each century and in the past five years we have been working very hard with our colleagues in many different countries because of a specific pandemic threat known as avian influenza or H5N1 and because of that many countries have been very focused on strengthening their defences for such a situation.

In the past several days, we have now heard about cases of infection in people caused by a different influenza known as the swine H1N1 influenza virus. Influenza viruses have been known to infect pigs for quite a long time and we know that every once in a while such viruses have caused infections in people, but right now in the current situation we appear to be in a situation where one of the swine viruses appears to be affecting significant number of people in at least a couple of different countries in different locations. This situation has raised questions about whether we are entering into a pandemic period.

Before we go further to what we know about this specific situation, let me just quickly review what we mean by a pandemic. A pandemic of influenza means that we have a new influenza virus to which most people in the world either have little immunity or no immunity and so this is different than our situation with regular influenza viruses. When we see such a new virus, if it has the ability to infect people and if it especially has the ability to move from person to person in a way that it is able to cause community outbreaks, large outbreaks of infection, then we certainly have the potential for the virus to spread from one country or one location to another.

Again, we have seen such occurrences a couple of times each century and so the question right now is whether we are in such a situation right now. Let us review the specifics:

One of the first things I want to caution everybody about is that we are in an evolving situation so we cannot be too focussed on numbers. These numbers can change quite rapidly as we know from any outbreak situation. So we have confirmed virus infections in the United States and in Mexico. Let me take the situations. In the United States as of the 25 April, yesterday, there were 11 laboratory- confirmed human cases of this swine influenza H1N1 virus. Seven of these infections in people occurred in California, two in Texas, two in Kansas. So we have 11 infections in total and I want to point out that all of these infections have been relatively mild, one of them did lead to a hospitalization for a brief period of time, but in general the infections have been mild.

Traditionally, as I mentioned as I mentioned these viruses have circulated in pigs but so far we evidence which suggests that these people were exposed to any sick pigs so we don't have any direct connect to swine right now. In addition preliminary virologic analysis of these viruses all show that they are basically the same virus when the genetic analyses are done. Other analyses continue right now, but basically we think the viruses have been seen in California, and in Kansas and in Texas are the same virus.

We also know that in the United States, there have been other reports of illness, so these are being investigated. For example, we know that in New York City, there have been cases of influenza, eight cases of influenza that have occurred in students, and that specimens have been sent to the US Centers for Disease Control for confirmatory testing. In addition, we know that at 100 students have been reported to have influenza like illness.

So far, among these students, as far as we understand, the disease has been mild. Right now we await further confirmation from New York.

In Mexico, we know that there have been cases of respiratory disease and cases of pneumonia and amongst these people some specimens have been sent out for testing, confirmatory testing. For example, 51 specimens from 51 people were sent to the public health laboratory in Winnipeg, Canada, and we know that 16 of these samples have been positive for this swine H1N1 influenza virus. Furthermore, we know that based on the work done in Canada and in the United States, that the viruses being seen in Mexico are essentially the same as the viruses that are being seen in the United States.

Testing is on-going and as this testing goes on we will have a better handle on all of the properties of these viruses.

Moreover we know that in Mexico there have been at least 1,000 cases of respiratory illness that were reported when the authorities have been studying this situation in April and among these cases there have been about 71 deaths. But I want to point out, these are cases of respiratory illness and we don't really know whether these cases represent a lot of swine 'flu infections or very few swine 'flu infections and so as investigations continue, we hope to have a better picture on this information.

One of the issues that all of this raises is what is the overall take on this situation and where are we. I think if look at the epidemiologic situation we have new influenza

viruses that are being detected in a couple of different locations and we know that these are the same viruses and so there are a number of questions we have about the extent of spread of the viruses that is how far are, and to what extent they might be seen in the countries where they are being reported from now and whether they are being found in any other locations. There is a great deal of work being done by authorities in many different countries.

In terms of the virology of these viruses, or again what is known about the viruses themselves, they are swine influenza viruses, that is they are an animal influenza virus, however, they are different from other swine influenza viruses that have been described in the US and in Mexico. To that extent they do represent a new kind of swine influenza infection. So at this time it is fair to characterize our assessment of the situation as serious and WHO and the countries which are being affected by this, and certainly all countries are looking at this situation very seriously, but it is also clear that we are in a period in which the picture is evolving, it is also clear that we are in a period in which we have to be very careful to collect the best possible information.

We really need to understand a bit more about the epidemiology, we want to understand a bit more about the behaviour of these viruses and we want to understand to the extent that these viruses cause mild infections, and the extent to which these viruses can cause serious infections.

So in response to this situation, WHO has initiated several different actions. Let me go over some of them to give you an idea of the range of the activities underway.

On Friday (24 April) WHO activated its emergency response room, what we call the SHOC Room (Strategic Health Operations Centre) and what this allows us to do is be in contact simultaneously with countries, institutions, different authorities around the world, with the media, different partners and this allows us to bring together a lot of different functions which can handle in an emergency situation. We have been in very close contact with many different governments as well as many other partners. For example we have been in contact with the UN, with non-governmental agencies, with industry, and we shall continue to work with all these partners so that everyone is as informed as possible and so that we can coordinate any necessary actions as well as possible.

Another action that was undertaken, is that after discussion with authorities in Mexico, the Mexican authorities did request that some assistance be provided and so WHO working with the governments in Canada, in the United States and in Mexico have helped to put together a number of people to go in to provide assistance to help clarify the epidemiologic situation as well as possible.

Another action undertaken by WHO was to convene the Emergency Committee of the International Health Regulations (IHR). This occurred yesterday (Saturday 25 April). The International Health Regulations are basically the overall public health architecture for how we deal with these large public health events or potential large public health events and basically it gives a way for all of the countries and authorities in the world to

interact together, to coordinate their actions and to deal with health threats and this is one of the major improvements in modern day public health.

The role of the Emergency Committee is to provide advice and guidance to the Director-General of the World Health Organization. One of the issues that was discussed with the Emergency Committee in which they provided advice, was whether we are in what is called a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Basically are we facing a situation which appears quite serious. I think that the Committee unanimously agreed that we are in such a situation and that it really warrants the utmost attention. So on the basis of that and the basis of the work and assessment being done by WHO and other colleagues, we have requested countries to help clarify this situation and to provide as much information as possible. So for example, we have asked all countries to increase their surveillance and watchfulness so that we can detect as quickly as possible how this virus may or may not be spreading.

One of the issues which was raised to the Committee, was whether we are in a situation where WHO should increase its pandemic phase, we are currently in Phase 3 and whether we should move it up to Phase 4. The Emergency Committee deliberated on this, and what they said is that we would like a little bit more information and a little bit more time to consider this. This is underway and more information is being collected and the Committee will be reconvened on Tuesday (29 April) unless there is additional information which indicates that we should meet earlier and right now the information does change on a fairly frequent basis. We will be mindful of that.

In addition, WHO is also undertaking a number of other actions. For example, we know that if this situation evolves, one of the questions that will come up very soon, is what is the availability of vaccines. We are already working with our collaborating centres, we have begun the preliminary work need to prepare influenza viruses for potential swine vaccine if we need it.

In addition, there has been a lot of work going on to make sure that we reduce the confusion as much as possible. For example, to produce a standard case definition which will be helpful both to the authorities looking for potential swine influenza cases as well as for the rest of us when we talk about what the situation is, so that we don't get disease mixed up with laboratory-confirmed cases and so on. In addition, the collaborating centres have been working very hard to produce the kinds of tests and reagents needed by other laboratories around the world so detect these infections. So there is a great deal of work going on that we can as quickly detect and monitor the situation and do this as well as is possible.

That provides a broad overview of why we take the situation seriously, what the specific situation is based on the information we have at this time and some of the actions which have been initiated at this time. As you know from experience that the situations evolve and we will continue to meet with you on a regular basis and provide the information as it becomes available to us. Let me stop there and we will take any questions.