

Influenza reaches epidemic proportions in US

E.P. Bannon
23 January 2015

Flu season of 2015 has returned to an epidemic level in the US, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It had reached epidemic proportions toward the end of 2014, followed by a brief ebbing period. According to the CDC, the flu is now widespread in 46 out of 50 states.

Though the flu itself is typically only deadly in children and the elderly, it can result in potentially life-threatening complications such as pneumonia. Rita Landgraf, Department of Health and Social Services secretary in the state of Delaware, called this year's death rate "unprecedented in recent years." Roughly 8.5 percent of all deaths across the country for the week ending on January 10 resulted from influenza or pneumonia. The weekly rate of hospitalizations for flu-related illnesses is higher than in any season since 2009.

For the third year in a row, the influenza and pneumonia mortality rate has jumped far beyond what the CDC considers to be the epidemic threshold. Each year as the flu season arrives, the country has less and less social and medical infrastructure at its disposal to deal with the illness. Amber McCarthy, an Iowa mother whose child died of the flu last month, told the press, "This shouldn't be happening in 2015."

In Hawaii, hospitals and clinics across the state have reportedly dealt with problems of overcrowding. In some cases, ambulances have been turned away. Pharmacies in almost every major region of the US have reported shortages of Tamiflu, an antiviral medicine designed to alleviate and shorten the duration of symptoms. The rapid spread of illness has even led to a shortage of cough syrup throughout the country.

While normally prescribed to anyone suffering severe flu cases, Tamiflu is essential for at-risk patients such as children, the elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions. Doctors and health officials in many parts of the country have instructed sick people to

"call around" to multiple pharmacies until they can find one with Tamiflu. A flu sufferer must take the drug within 48 hours of contracting the virus; otherwise it is no longer an effective form of treatment.

An additional 19 children had died since overall numbers reported by the CDC the week before last. There are now a total of 45 pediatric deaths, a 66 percent increase over the previous year. Medical officials have begun to compare this year with the flu season of 2012-2013, which was particularly severe. At this point two years ago there had been 51 pediatric deaths.

The Indiana State Department of Health reported that there have been 85 flu deaths statewide. The department says it is the state's highest flu death rate in 10 years, and the season is not even halfway through. As of Sunday, there have been 16 confirmed flu deaths in Delaware alone.

Fifteen people have died from the flu in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. The total number of cases countywide currently stands at 3,949, with 104 deaths occurring throughout Pennsylvania. Six-hundred and fifty new cases appeared last week, including eight more deaths. Massachusetts has reported 5,519 flu cases this year as opposed to the 1,620 cases last year. Dallas County, Texas, has reported 2 deaths, 86 hospitalizations and 34 admissions to intensive care units.

In December, the CDC reported that the flu season would be worse than usual. The 2014 vaccine was modeled on a strain of the Influenza A-H3N2 virus that originated in Texas. A more powerful flu strain surfaced later in Switzerland, rendering the vaccine ineffective. Two thirds of flu cases in the US this season have come from the Swiss strain. As a result, this year's vaccine has proven to be only 23 percent effective, when it is usually 50 to 60 percent effective.

The virus has also spread into Canada. The Public

Health Agency of Canada reported that in the period between January 4 and January 10, seven of the thirteen provinces and territories saw “widespread activity.” These are the highest levels reported to date, according to the agency.

Hospitals in many parts of the country have put visitor restrictions in place in the hopes of minimizing the spread of the flu to patients and staff. Doctors have enacted age restrictions, not allowing visitors below the ages of anywhere between 16 and 12, depending on the specific facility. Some visitors are also required to wear facemasks in order to reduce the spread of airborne pathogens through patient wards.

A 2013 CDC study of eight flu seasons found that many healthy children died from the illness, despite having no underlying conditions. Most children who died from the flu were not vaccinated. One third of the children had died within three days of developing symptoms.

Several schools in West Virginia with a combined student population of around 1,000 closed for two days last month because so many teachers had fallen ill to the virus. In Polk County, Georgia, so many children had come down with the flu that the district shut all 10 of its schools and started its winter break two days in advance. A school in New Braunfels, Texas, also was forced to close for two days because 20 percent of its students and 30 percent of its staff were home sick.

News agencies have reported that flu activity levels have subsided within the past few days. Despite the dip in reported cases, the mortality rate still remains above the epidemic threshold, and the number of flu-related hospital visits has stayed well above the national baseline for the eighth consecutive week. Still, hospitals in Indiana, Ohio and elsewhere have already lifted patient visitor restrictions. It is unclear at this point whether or not this year’s flu season has yet peaked.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact