

Special flu policies and procedures for coming academic year

To: All Penn State Faculty
From: Provost Rodney Erickson
Date: August 7, 2009

While you may not be seeing much in the news now about the H1N1 (also called swine flu) virus, we want to provide important information to you about this virus and the impact we expect it could have at Penn State this fall. We also want to review our responsibility in balancing federal and state health guidelines and class attendance.

University Health Services is closely tracking the information provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Pennsylvania Department of Health (Pa DOH) and recently met with Pa DOH officials so as to be able to provide you with the most up-to-date information. The WHO declared on June 11, 2009, that H1N1 is causing a mpanemic, or worldwide outbreak. The illness is currently peaking in the southern hemisphere and waning in the United States.

Even so, public health officials predict that the H1N1 virus will return in the early fall with H1N1 influenza cases occurring as early as late September or early October in the United States. This is an illness that is much more likely to occur in individuals ages 5-25 years old than in any other age group. College campuses such as Penn State are likely to see high numbers of cases.

Because this is a disease that is occurring widely and is highly contagious, public health recommendations are aimed not at containment, but rather at mitigation, or reducing the burden of disease and minimizing its spread.

The most effective strategies for disease mitigation are personal prevention through hand-washing and cough/cold etiquette and other non-pharmacological interventions (NPIs). The most important NPI currently recommended is the exclusion of ill individuals from public,

school and group activities. As you can imagine, this will be extremely challenging in an institution like Penn State.

In compliance with CDC and Pa DOH recommendations, Penn State will instruct students with influenza signs and symptoms to follow CDC self-isolation guidelines. Students will be instructed that they should NOT attend classes or any public gatherings while ill. We will ask symptomatic students to leave campus if possible and to return home to recover. Usually the illness and isolation period will be about a week. Given the contagious nature of the illness, its prevalence to date among college-age students, and the self-isolation protocols, it is prudent to prepare for the possibility of significant absences from class during the fall semester.

Likewise, faculty experiencing flu symptoms should follow the CDC self-isolation guidelines and should NOT be present in their classrooms, labs, studios or offices during their illness. Faculty should alert appropriate officials in their units as soon as possible to inform them that they will be absent and/or to identify possible substitutes.

This extraordinary situation could cause significant stress for infected students as they are required to miss lectures, labs and studios. We recognize, too, the added burden this places on faculty who have students who, because of flu, cannot attend some instruction periods or scheduled exams.

We request that you make every reasonable effort to enable students to complete their courses while recognizing that it is imperative that infected students safeguard the health of faculty, staff and other students by following the non-attendance CDC self-isolation guidelines. Toward this end, we are asking that you:

-- Reinforce the self-isolation guidelines in your course syllabus while recognizing yourself that the current economic environment may drive some students to believe that they should attend class no matter what, rather than risk lower grades or even fewer semester credits. (In practice, if current trends hold, most student absences will be a week or less.) Please help students to understand that in balancing

public health and class attendance, public health considerations must carry the greatest weight.

-- Establish and announce in your syllabus a reasonable timeline and means through which students can inform you that they are experiencing flu symptoms and will, therefore, be absent (students should NOT visit you personally to do this--the goal is to limit the spread of this very contagious virus).

-- Follow Academic and Administrative Policy E-11 (that implements University Senate Policy 42-27): Students should be provided with a reasonable opportunity to make up missed work. Ordinarily, it is inappropriate to substitute for the missed assignment the weighting of a semester's work that does not include the missed assignment. Completion of all assignments assures the greatest chance for students to develop heightened understanding and content mastery that is unavailable through the weighting process. The opportunity to complete all assignments supports the university's desire to enable students to make responsible situational decisions without endangering their academic work.

-- Do NOT expect to receive a health care provider's certification that a student has had the flu. The university does not have sufficient staff to provide this service. Furthermore, as an important element of self-isolation, we do not want to add to the congregation of potentially contagious individuals, who otherwise do not need medical attention, in the student health center.

A Sample Insert for Your Fall 2009 Syllabus

Special Fall 2009 Flu Protocols -In compliance with Pennsylvania Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control recommendations, students should NOT attend class or any public gatherings while ill with influenza. Students with flu symptoms will be asked to leave campus if possible and to return home during recovery. The illness and self-isolation period will usually be about a week. It is very important that individuals avoid spreading the flu to others.

Most students should be able to complete a successful semester despite a flu-induced absence. Faculty will provide students who are absent because of illness with a reasonable opportunity to make up missed work. Ordinarily, it is inappropriate to substitute for the missed assignment the weighting of a semester's work that does not include the missed assignment or exam. Completion of all assignments and exams assures the greatest chance for students to develop heightened understanding and content mastery that is unavailable through the weighting process. The opportunity to complete all assignments and exams supports the university's desire to enable students to make responsible situational decisions, including the decision to avoid spreading a contagious virus to other students, staff, and faculty, without endangering their academic work.

Students with the flu do not need to provide a physician's certification of illness. However, ill students should inform their teachers (but not through personal contact in which there is a risk of exposing others to the virus) as soon as possible that they are absent because of the flu. Likewise students should contact their instructors as quickly as possible to arrange to make up missed assignments or exams.

If you have questions about academic policy-related issues, please call the Associate Dean/Chief Academic Officer of your college. For health-related questions you can email Dr. Margaret Spear, director, University Health Services, at uhsinfo@sa.psu.edu.