

Opening statement

Seminar on

Pandemic Influenza – Cross Sectoral Preparedness and Planning

Ministry of Health and Care Services, Oslo 19. February 2009

State secretary Rigmor Aasrud

Dear speakers, dear participants,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to this important seminar. I am in particularly grateful to all foreign speakers for their willingness to attend and share their experiences in the field of pandemic influenza with us.

Infectious disease pandemics are an ever-present threat to people and countries worldwide. Pandemics are by definition a global phenomenon. They arise from the emergence of new infectious agents. In a world of large and increasingly mobile populations, easily transmissible infections pose particular challenges for the international community. It is therefore also a potential threat for Norway.

As of today, there has been no recent outbreak of pandemic influenza. Historically, such outbreaks have occurred on average three times every century. The 1918 pandemic caused severe morbidity and mortality, and is estimated to have killed 40–100 million people, in less than 1 year. The 1957 and 1968 pandemics were much milder. They caused an estimated 2 million and 1 million deaths, mainly in elderly people. But they still stressed the capacity of the health systems of many countries.

The next pandemic could have more serious consequences, especially if it should come in the form of the H5N1 variety, which is common in birds and poultry. This virus has already infected humans and may at some point in the near future become capable of human-to-human transmission. We have in pandemic flu an infection which is likely to have a devastating impact.

The risk is that such a virus could become the cause of a human influenza pandemic has delivered substantial progress in international preparedness planning. The challenge is unchanged, despite declining public interest. There is no time for complacency and inaction.

It is of course highly uncertain if H5N1 will evolve into a pandemic. But we cannot afford to ignore it as a major national and international threat.

It is impossible to predict when the next pandemic will occur. But it is important that we learn as much as we can from past pandemics and make the best possible preparations. No government or international agency can tackle these challenges alone. It is critical to success that all work closely together in well-coordinated ways. To address the threats of pandemic influenza, we therefore need strategies which are inter-sectoral in scope. It challenges the government, civil society and the private sector to work together in the common interest.

According to the ECDC (European Centre for Disease Control) and its excellent report on Norway's Influenza Preparedness (from October 2007), Norway has made good progress. Many efforts have been made since 2001.

According to ECDC the health service sector has taken the issues of pandemic planning seriously. There is a national expert committee (the Pandemic Committee) providing health sector advice. This committee is providing health advice and is an important part of our system. Another strength is the National Influenza Pandemic

Preparedness Plan. It provides a clear division of labour between the different public bodies. I will underline that The National Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Plan also should serve as a basis for cross-sectoral measures and planning. As a consequence of these and other positive developments Norway is “half way prepared” for the next pandemic. However, as the report also states: “that is not enough.” More needs to be done. In short, this is why we are here today!

This means that we have to reach a level of preparedness where we can be confident that when the pandemic comes:

- primary health care systems will be able to deliver treatments like antivirals and antibiotics to most of those who need them as quickly as necessary;
- hospital systems will be ready and able to deliver acute care to severely ill influenza patients as well as continuing to provide essential treatment for non-influenza-related conditions
- business continuity planning has been undertaken to ensure that essential services like power, food and fuel supplies will continue to function at the local level;
- pandemic vaccine will start to arrive in hands of primary care services within six months of the start of the pandemic

For Norway to obtain the necessary level of preparedness ECDC recommended that the government focuses on the following work:

1. Integrated planning across different sectors.

A pandemic will impact on the whole of government and society. While Norway has a well-developed health sector plan, it remains to complete the transition to make it multi-sectoral.

2. Making plans operational at the local level.

This is probably the least developed area, and includes the preparation of local primary care and hospital services and all other core local services, both public and private.

3. Ensuring the cooperation between the municipalities and the local hospitals.

The County Governor's role as coordinator and facilitator between hospitals and municipalities in influenza preparedness should be strengthened.

4. Business continuity planning.

The public as well as private sector need to plan for the maintenance of essential public or private services outside the health sector during a pandemic

5. Stepping up prevention efforts against seasonal influenza.

Immunization and a number of other public health measures planned for use against pandemic influenza can also be used against seasonal influenza. The more effective Norway is in preventing seasonal influenza, the better is the country prepared to deal with the pandemic.

We have taken note of these recommendations, and today's seminar is an attempt to initiate activities outside the health sector in pandemic influenza preparedness. This meeting focuses therefore in particular on integrated planning across different sectors and business continuity planning.

Integrated planning for a pandemic across different sectors will also be the theme of a national exercise later on this year (Exercise SNØ, 1-2 December.).

The Ministry of Health and Care Services will in 2009 finish the revision of the next National Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Plan. This implies that all ministries will

have to check out their preparedness plans and if necessary update them to meet a pandemic flu.

As you may know there will be a large European pandemic exercise called “TOR” on the 18th and 19th November. This exercise is planned by the Health Protection Agency (HPA) in the UK on behalf of the European Commission. Norway and probably Switzerland will also participate in this exercise.

In conclusion, we must not forget that the main bio-terrorist is nature herself. It is only a matter of time! The time to prepare and plan is now. I wish you all an interesting and useful day!

Thank you for your attention.