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A Historic Time

BY CHRISTINE NUTTY, 2009 APIC PRESIDENT



We are living in exciting times. Every day in this profession is like a new career. As infection-related issues grow louder and more persistent, the infection prevention experts seem to be coming out of the woodwork.

Those who know little about medicine and microbiology are repeating the mantra, "Hand washing, hand washing," as if it is a panacea that will cure all infections and save the world. As critical as that one action is to infection prevention, much more is required. We have seen this in the past with many healthcare workers who thought latex gloves suddenly made them impervious to germs. They wore the same pair of gloves from patient room to patient room because they were mainly concerned with their own safety (not the safety of the patient or resident). We still see this in many healthcare facilities. But infection prevention requires much more than gloves and hand washing. Protecting

patients is far more complicated, which is why it requires dedicated, competent professionals.

The biggest challenge for us is to get busy healthcare workers to act on all the right information (e.g., if you are sick, stay home). We need to ensure that the information given to both the healthcare worker and the consumer is simple, clear, and complete. We need to help busy reporters emphasize the right messages, not just part of the information.

With so many diverse audiences to educate, it's no wonder infection prevention can seem overwhelming. But you are not alone. A great tool is your ability to network with fellow APIC members. Even those who are not in a chapter can find answers via APIC. Some of my APIC chapter friends have been asking these questions:

- What type of mask do you use?
- What is your sick leave policy? When do you allow employees to return to work? What questions do you ask when they call in sick?
- What is your flu vaccine policy, both seasonal and H1N1? How do you enforce it? What disciplinary measures are in place for those who refuse a vaccine?
- How do you test for the flu? Do you use stated symptoms to determine flu rates?
- What criteria do you use to determine rates of ILI in your patient/resident populations?
- Are you involved in any community flu vaccination initiatives?
- What employee education do you provide? What efforts are you undertaking to improve vaccination rates?

In the coming months, the H1N1 flu season will be studied and analyzed. New regulations will be written. The opportunities available to all of you include undertaking research studies of the responses and actions surrounding this season. Never before have we been in the middle of a slow motion pandemic like this. We were warned years ago that we would experience another pandemic flu like the one that occurred in 1918. But many of us felt we were well prepared and could handle the outbreak with our lengthy, well-written "Pandemic Flu Plan" and policies. Little did we know that the effects of the outbreak would be far more extensive than we dreamed. Staffing issues, multiple flu vaccines, and the argument over which mask/respirator should be used are just some of the issues consuming your time.

While our world continues to get more complicated and the stakes get higher, some of the effects are like an infection preventionist's dream come true – everyone is talking about hand washing (and how to sing a song while you do it), and schools across the country have put soap back into kids' bathrooms. Schools, colleges, and companies are using alcohol hand rubs and hand sanitizers. New products are being developed every day for disinfection of the environment. People are being told they should NOT take an antibiotic just because they are sick.

As I traveled this year and visited with APIC members and members of other infection prevention societies, one thing became clear: We all want to make a difference and save lives. Each one of you is working very hard. As you experience this historic H1N1 flu season, think about the studies you are doing that can be written up as an abstract for presentation next summer at the Annual Conference 2010 in New Orleans! We have much to learn from this experience and you can be a part of it. 

Please stay safe,

Christine J. Nutty, 2009 APIC President