



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF BIOETHICS  
MEDICAL COLLEGE OF WISCONSIN

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H1N1 INFLUENZA ETHICS BRIEFING

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With the advent of H1N1 influenza (“swine flu”) and the World Health Organization's raising the alert level for a pandemic to Level 5 (with Level 6 signifying that a pandemic has begun), Tom May, PhD, of the Center comments on one of the ethical issues posed by this possible pandemic. Dr. May served as a consultant to the Florida Department of Public Health on ethical issues related to triage during a potential pan-flu epidemic. He was also chair of two Centers for Disease Control special emphasis panels on vaccination issues.

Arthur R. Derse, MD, JD  
Professor of Bioethics and Emergency Medicine, and Interim Director  
Center for the Study of Bioethics, Medical College of Wisconsin

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Much attention is currently being generated by an outbreak of swine flu in Mexico that has spread to the United States. While U.S. cases have been limited and mostly mild, the outbreak raises fears in the context of recent concerns about potential avian flu pandemics, as well as the threat of SARS just a few years ago. In this light, it is important for the public not to panic and over-react to this outbreak. While awareness and vigilance are warranted, we must keep in mind the potential indirect negative effects that can result from over-reaction. Two examples come to mind.

First, public reaction to the Anthrax attacks in the fall of 2001. While the number of cases of actual Anthrax infection was very limited, over 30,000 people began to take the antibiotic Cipro. The implications of this are serious: As NIH President Kenneth Shine testified before Congress: “...less than 20 cases resulted in thousands of people taking antibiotics that were not indicated....These antibiotics changed the bacteriological environment and may have rendered some organisms resistant to the antibiotics employed.”

Second, another “swine flu scare” that faced the U.S. in 1976 resulted in a premature mass vaccination campaign that was ultimately more harmful than the actual flu itself that year: over 1,000 cases of Guillain-Barre syndrome were attributed to the swine flu vaccination, and the campaign is to this day widely viewed as one of the worst cases of over-reaction in public health interventions.

I do not mean to suggest that the public should not take steps to protect themselves from potential infection. Basic precautions such as frequent handwashing, and distancing oneself from crowds when possible are two examples. Most importantly, those worried about influenza outbreaks should seek information that can offer advice and information about what is real vs. rumor. Two websites that are particularly useful for these purposes are the CDC website [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu) and the department of Health and Human Services website, [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)

Tom May, PhD,  
Associate Professor of Bioethics & Director of Graduate Studies  
Center for the Study of Bioethics, Medical College of Wisconsin

To hear Tom May's interview on the topic on WUWM's Lake Effect,  
[http://www.wuwm.com/programs/lake\\_effect/view\\_le.php?articleid=706](http://www.wuwm.com/programs/lake_effect/view_le.php?articleid=706).

Questions or comments? Email us at [bioethics@mcw.edu](mailto:bioethics@mcw.edu) or call 414-456-8498.