



Thursday, August 13, 2009

News | Ottawa and Region

Schools get ready for second wave of swine flu

By DONNA CASEY, SUN MEDIA Last Updated: 17th July 2009, 7:18pm

Press 1 if you have a fever, press 2 if you can't stop coughing.

This fall, Algonquin College officials will turn to an interactive voice response telephone system to keep track of the spread of H1N1 influenza among students living at the college's Woodroffe campus.

The automated system will call the 1,050 students living in residence and ask if they are showing any symptoms associated with the swine flu virus.

College officials believe the interactive call system will give them up-to-date and accurate snapshots of the spread of a potential H1N1 outbreak, said Brian Burns, director of institutional research and planning at Algonquin.

"There's no way one person can be knocking door-to-door. There's a lot of hit and miss to that," said Burns of the advantages of the Vocantas interactive voice system.

Algonquin has tested the call system and used it last fall for a survey to assess students' needs since arriving at the college.

In planning for a potential outbreak, Algonquin took its cue from lessons learned at Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B., when a viral outbreak affecting 300 students forced the cancellation of classes and the closing of public buildings in October 2006.

College and university officials in Ottawa are now fine-tuning their pandemic plans for the return of students in September.

Public health experts are expecting the second wave of H1N1 cases to hit around mid-September and expect between 20% to 30% of the public to fall ill to the virus.

Unlike seasonal influenza, which affects mostly the elderly, the H1N1 virus appears to be attacking children, teens and young adults in high numbers.

Post-secondary institutions will also be rolling out public awareness messages about hand hygiene and "social distancing" steps to take if a student becomes infected with H1N1.

But it's a tough sell amid the frosh-week fun, said Michael Histed, director of risk management and pandemic planning at the University of Ottawa.

"It's a challenge to bring that message to do completely the opposite," said Histed.

If a major outbreak hits the university's residences — the largest in the city with 6,000 students — relocating hundreds of infected residents just isn't an option, said Histed.

"We're not going to be able to stop it, so we're just trying to minimize and slow the spread," said Histed of plans to have student supervisors on residence floors keep tabs on the health of fellow students.

Carleton University plans to bring in outside health care workers to help deal with any H1N1 outbreak among its 2,800 students in residence, said Beth Gorham, the school's manager of public affairs.

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