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## Swine Flu Threat to Business Prompts a Call for Readiness

By CAM SIMPSON and BETSY MCKAY

WASHINGTON -- An outbreak of the H1N1 swine flu in the coming flu season could be severe enough to cause staffing shortages and other workplace disruptions, officials said Wednesday.

The government also acknowledged that supplies of vaccines to prevent the disease are taking longer to produce than originally forecast.

Businesses should allow employees flexibility to stay home to recuperate or care for sick relatives, said Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano in a news conference. Businesses should consider dropping requirements that workers get doctors' notes for absences, Mr. Locke said, because they could "overload a health-care system that will likely be overstressed during this year's flu season."

Employers also should think about alternative work arrangements such as telecommuting for workers who may be at higher risk for contracting the disease or suffering more serious effects, he said. The flu has been most severe for pregnant women, young people and those with existing health problems, including asthma, diabetes and chronic heart disease.

U.S. government officials said they now expect only about 45 million doses of H1N1 vaccine to be available by Oct. 15, though they expect about 20 million doses every week after that until they take delivery of 195 million doses purchased by the government.

Four of five manufacturers supplying the U.S. market took longer than expected to produce the anticipated amount of antigen for vaccine, an HHS spokesman said.

The vaccine-production schedule is shifting, and the government is pushing to increase the number of available doses, said Rear Adm. Stephen Redd of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For example, while Australia-based CSL Ltd. will supply swine flu vaccine first to Australia to help stem a flu season outbreak there, a newly licensed high-speed line for syringes for flu vaccine in Illinois will speed vaccines for the U.S., officials said.

The new H1N1 virus accounts for 71% of all flu viruses circulating globally, according to the World Health Organization. More than 182,166 people have been confirmed by laboratory testing to have had the virus, and 1,799 have died, the WHO says. As in the U.S., most cases are mild.

The disease has taken a heavy toll and has spread rapidly in the Southern Hemisphere during its winter flu season. In Argentina, second only to the U.S. in number of deaths, those who have died include nurses exposed to ill patients in the hospital. The disease may be receding in South America and parts of Australia now, but is on the rise in southern Africa, according to the CDC.

The H1N1 flu strain, first detected four months ago, never took the summer lull that public-health officials anticipated, contributing to concerns this coming season's outbreak could be severe. Still, the impact thus far has been relatively mild, even when compared to normal seasonal flu.

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