



### ***Pandemic Influenza - Learning from History***

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Are you a history enthusiast? Let's go back in history. The year is 1918. On April 20<sup>th</sup>, the *Pocatello Tribune* issued a warning about influenza in southeastern Idaho.

“Influenza has taken a new start at Blackfoot, and people are warned against taking unnecessary risk. People who have it in their homes are instructed to tack cards or pieces of paper on every door of the house, bearing the word ‘Influenza,’ so persons coming to the place will stay out.

Do not bunch up with other people in conversation. Stand at some distance. Do not let anybody talk to you at such close quarters that you have to take their breath....”

It is fascinating, and a bit distressing, to read about the influenza pandemic that touched nearly every corner of the globe 90 years ago. Articles describing the 1918 influenza pandemic's impact on Southeastern Idaho can be located at Idaho State University's Eli M. Oboler Library in the archives of local area newspapers. The news articles describe remedies to treat what was referred to as “Spanish Influenza,” obituaries for those that perished, and information about quarantine orders that closed schools, banned funerals, and other public gatherings. By November 19, 1918, the *Pocatello Tribune* reported 4,000 cases of influenza in Pocatello and no plan to reopen theatres, churches, and other institutions by Thanksgiving.

One line of thought to studying history is to learn from it. The plague, smallpox, influenza, and other infectious diseases have surely changed the course of history as they decimated populations. The message is, pandemics are a part of our history and will continue to be long into the future. The last influenza pandemic took place in 1968 and according to scientists we are “long overdue” for another one. They are closely monitoring Avian Influenza, also known as bird influenza and H5N1, to see if it mutates into a strain that is easily transmitted from person-to-person. The current total of cases of bird influenza stands at 383 with 241 deaths. Thankfully, it has not transformed itself into an efficient traveler spreading disease from one person to another and it has not reached the United States.

Those in public health and healthcare tread carefully when warning pandemic influenza is around the corner, even with our historical knowledge. Without a crystal ball to know

exactly when one will strike, we risk overwhelming the public with information, or being accused of crying wolf because people refuse to accept that it will happen again. That being said, with the belief that it *is* going to happen, emergency planners throughout the world are preparing for the next pandemic.

Southeastern District Health Department, with regional emergency planning partners, will be conducting a series of exercises and providing community education throughout July about pandemic influenza. It is hoped the events and information campaign will create discussions throughout Southeastern Idaho which produces helpful input from citizens and solutions that can be added to emergency plans.

A series of articles related to pandemic preparedness will be forthcoming. The series will provide recommendations for businesses, anticipated changes in hospital and health care, disease containment strategies, family preparedness guidelines, and more.

For more information about the upcoming exercise or to be involved, please call Penny Nelson at 239-5295, send an e-mail to [dofarrell@phd6.idaho.gov](mailto:dofarrell@phd6.idaho.gov), or visit the Southeastern District Health Department's website, [www.sdhdidaho.org](http://www.sdhdidaho.org).