



**MINISTRY OF  
HEALTH  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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Ms Z Cassim  
Chief Executive Officer  
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**LYNNWOOD RIDGE**  
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Dear Ms Cassim

**PANDEMIC INFLUENZA A (H1N1) 2009**

As the Minister of Health, I am personally writing to you regarding the above disease for two reasons:

- To give you information that will assist you personally to deal with the disease; and
- To request your assistance and personal involvement and that of your high office in effectively communicating key messages on Influenza A (H1N1) 2009 to our communities.

The Official Scientific name of this disease is: **Pandemic Influenza A (H1N1) 2009**. It started in Mexico and the USA in April this year. It was initially known as **Swine Flu** because it was thought to have originated from pigs. Now it is understood that it is a mixture of human and avian (birds) elements. Hence the disease has nothing to do with the consumption of pork or pork products. It is now simply referred to as **pandemic influenza** or preferably by its official name.

Since April this year, the virus has spread rapidly to 166 countries globally. In Africa it has so far spread to 19 countries. At the time of writing this letter, the virus has affected a total of 177,457 people (laboratory confirmed) globally with 1,457 confirmed deaths.

In South Africa, to date we have confirmed 3,485 cases with 6 deaths.

**Chronological Sequence of Events**

- April 12: an outbreak of influenza-like illness in Veracruz, Mexico, reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO)



**AIDS HELPLINE: 0800 012 322**

- April 15-17: two cases of a new A (H1N1) virus infection identified in two southern California counties in USA
- April 23: New influenza A (H1N1) virus infection confirmed in several patients in Mexico
- April 24: WHO declares a public health event of international concern (PHEIC)
- April 27: WHO declares pandemic phase 4 (it means sustained community transmission within a particular country, in this case Mexico).
- April 29: WHO declares pandemic phase 5 (it means 2 or more countries affected)
- After the fourth Emergency Committee meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) concluded that the criteria for a global pandemic have been met and the Director-General, Dr Margaret Chan, declared a Pandemic (phase 6). This simply means that the disease has spread to countries in all regions of the WHO and was spreading very fast. However, I wish to emphasize that the declaration of a pandemic does not mean that the disease is virulent. It simply means it is spreading all over.

On 6 July the WHO described the spread of the pandemic within affected countries and to new countries as inevitable and unstoppable. Fortunately though, while this may be so, they noted that the most people who contract the virus will have mild symptoms. Nevertheless as health officials, globally and locally, we are still worried by the deaths that have so far occurred (globally 0,8% and in South Africa 0,2% of the affected people). The virus mostly affects individuals in the age group 10 – 29 years. Most of these individuals are in schools or institutions of higher learning.

The WHO advised that countries must concentrate on mitigating the impact of the disease on the communities in doing this, effective communication is the key.

### **Mode of Spread**

The disease is spread by droplet infection i.e. when an infected person coughs or sneezes, and you inhale the air into which they have sneezed or coughed, even if they cough onto a surface and you inhale the air around, then you may get infected.

### **Symptoms of disease**

The symptoms can be divided into 3 main categories:

- Mild
- Moderate
- Severe

*Mild symptoms include:*

- Runny or blocked nose;
- Cough;
- Fever;
- Muscle aches and pains; and
- General feeling of un-wellness.

The overwhelming majority of people worldwide have mild symptoms and will not need any specialised medical care. Hence people with mild symptoms should be treated just like common influenza. However, the following people with mild symptoms should also see a doctor urgently:

- People with chronic heart or lung diseases;
- Pregnant women;
- People living with HIV and AIDS
- People with diabetes mellitus

*Moderate symptoms include mild symptoms plus:*

- Shortness of breath;
- Chest pain;
- Persistent vomiting;
- Diarrhoea and signs of dehydration

*Severe symptoms include mild and moderate symptoms:*

- Difficulty in breathing (respiratory distress)
- Blue lips, tongue or other parts of the body
- Severe drowsiness and loss of consciousness

Anybody with moderate or severe symptoms must seek and receive urgent medical attention

#### **Provincial spread of the Disease**

The spread of the disease within our provinces as a percentage of our total country infections is as follows:

|               |       |
|---------------|-------|
| Gauteng       | 52.2% |
| Western Cape  | 23.2% |
| KwaZulu-Natal | 10%   |
| Eastern Cape  | 5.7%  |
| Limpopo       | 2.9%  |
| Mpumalanga    | 2.1%  |
| North West    | 1.9%  |
| Free State    | 1.3%  |
| Northern Cape | 0.1%  |

#### **The 6 deaths:**

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Western Cape  | 3 |
| Eastern Cape  | 1 |
| Free State    | 1 |
| KwaZulu-Natal | 1 |

## **Testing for the virus**

Official testing is done by the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) which is situated in Gauteng and decentralized recently to the Western Cape. Testing will be done on recommendation by a doctor. Patients who seek care within the health system should not be requesting the lab test on their own. It is a doctor who must decide. We note that in the private health sector, there is mass testing, but this is not recommended by WHO. Doctors should also treat suspected cases in terms of protocols provided by the National Department of Health.

## **Treatment**

The treatment of choice is Tamiflu. This should be prescribed by a doctor and is only recommended for those with:

- Mild symptoms in the specialized risk categories mentioned above
- Moderate symptoms
- Severe symptoms

Mass treatment with Tamiflu will lead to mass resistance to the drug and render it useless even for those individuals for whom it may be life-saving.

## **Closure of Institutions**

Experience throughout the world has shown that closure of schools and institutions of higher education, shopping malls and work places have not been effective in stemming the spread of the disease. Instead it caused severe social disruptions.

What we advise is that any learner, educator, or worker with mild symptoms should stay at home. If there are many learners and/or educators staying away, then the affected institution should consult the Department of Education, which together with health authorities will advise on what course of action needs to be taken.

## **Simple Hygiene**

Due to the mode of spread of the disease as mentioned earlier, simple hygiene is recommended as follows:

- Wash hands with soap frequently;
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or your sleeve;
- Never cough into your hands, rather cough into your elbow;
- If you were forced to cough into your hands, don't touch anything like door handles, windows, table tops or utensils until you have washed your hands with soap;
- If you experience mild symptoms, stay at home and avoid contact with people.

I wish to assure you that everything is being done by scientists the world over, working together with the WHO to try and produce the vaccine. If things go well, such a vaccine may be available within a few months.

I wish to thank you for taking the time to read this personal letter to you, and also wish to thank you in anticipation of your active involvement in communicating and in mitigating the effects, of the disease.

If you need more information, please call the following number for assistance: 0861 364 232, or email: [H1N1@health.gov.za](mailto:H1N1@health.gov.za)

With kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. Motsoaledi', written over a large, loopy circular flourish.

**DR A. MOTSOLEDI, MP**  
**MINISTER OF HEALTH**  
**DATE: 20 AUGUST 2009**