

# VITAL SIGNS

Perspectives of the president of APHA

## Ensuring that all Americans have access to flu vaccine is critical

**W**ITH A low number of influenza cases reported as of February, it looked as though we might dodge a full-fledged U.S. flu epidemic this season.

This is fortunate, as the Trust for America's Health estimates that a pandemic flu outbreak in the United States could result in 89,000 to 207,000 deaths and cost the economy between \$71 billion and \$166 billion.

Unfortunately, there is real cause for concern on influenza. Outbreaks of avian flu have been documented in Southeast Asia and the Netherlands, and investigations suggest person-to-person transmission in some cases. Significantly, the H5N1 avian flu strain in Southeast Asia appears to have killed young, healthy people and may carry a case fatality rate of more than 70 percent. There is serious speculation that avian flu could spark the next major global pandemic.

In October, the United States was facing a flu vaccine crisis when a key manufacturer announced that 48 million doses of flu vaccine were unusable because of bacterial contamination. The result was a wild scramble for flu vaccine. Millions of Americans who dutifully lined up for their flu shots were told to wait or come back when supplies were more plentiful. Federal and state officials made valiant efforts to locate vaccine, and by late January, what had become a drought turned into an excess of supply in some areas of the country (see story, Page 5). Despite the best efforts of public health and medical workers, it is likely that millions of vaccine-eligible residents will not get vaccinated this season.

So what is the problem here? There are many lessons that we should learn from this season. First is that habits are hard to break and even harder to change. Ready or not, fall is when people expect to get their flu shots. If we are not ready, the public is not very forgiving or flexible.

To guarantee doses, we need a minimum of three flu vaccine suppliers for this country. The United States should commit to buying back unused vaccine to ensure that vaccine manufacturers will continue to make a sufficient supply.

We should also continue to support regulations that safeguard the quality of vaccine supplies. Had any of the contaminated vaccine been allowed to be used, it would have set back public immunizations for years to come.

Additionally, we should commit to a policy of universal flu vaccination. Now is the time to go beyond the laundry list of eligible persons and recognize that changing rules confuses people. One advantage of a universal flu campaign is that everyone reminds each other to get vaccinated.

In November, APHA adopted an influenza policy that calls for measures such as creating guidelines for vaccine distribution in the event of a shortage, incentives for drug companies to manufacture flu vaccine and a federal purchase program for uninsured adults.

Our nation should commit to policies and funds that ensure there is an adequate vaccine supply and that everyone gets vaccinated against the flu. Providing flu vaccinations is one of the important ways we can measure our nation's public health preparedness. Given the specter of avian flu, we can ill afford to wait. ■



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Web site, state environmental fact sheets now available

## Environmental public health services in spotlight

**T**HE challenges and successes of environmental public health at the state and local levels are being highlighted through a new Web site and fact sheet series.

Created through APHA's Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services Project, the resources are being used to educate 'policy-makers on the importance of environmental public health and draw attention to the need for funding on the issue.

The new Web site, which is online now at <[www.epps-apha.org](http://www.epps-apha.org)>, features an overview of environmental public health, highlights the work that environmental public health workers carry out and spotlights critical issues faced by communities and workers.

The APHA resources are an outgrowth of a 2003 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention strategy that set a course for revitalizing the nation's environmental public health services. APHA is working to implement the strategy by educating policy-makers on such services, organizing its efforts around a catchphrase of "Environmental Public Health: Everyone. Everywhere. Every Day."

PHA's efforts are especially crucial now because of challenges facing the environmental public health work force, such as aging personnel, low pay scales, minimal advancement opportunities and a lack of training opportunities. At the same time, environmental public health issues are growing more complex, with workers dealing with everything from chemical contamination and terrorism to West Nile virus and food safety.

"Environmental public health workers and programs play a crucial role in protecting the health of the public," said Tracy Kolian, MPH, APHA's policy analyst. "It's vital that we, as public health advocates, educate decision-makers on these issues."

A key feature of the new environmental public health Web site is its downloadable fact sheets that profile issues faced by individual states. So far, fact sheets are available for

four states: Alabama, California, Iowa and Pennsylvania. Work is under way on additional fact sheets, with Maryland and Mississippi editions expected to debut in coming months.

The fact sheets discuss environmental public health topics of interest in each state, such as sprawl, air quality, childhood lead poisoning, toxic waste, healthy homes and dirty water. The fact sheets also highlight model programs in the states that are working to remedy existing environmental public health problems and prevent new ones from occurring. For example, the Philadelphia Department of Health is using funding from CDC to conduct an urban rodent control program to protect residents from disease.

The fact sheets, which

were reviewed by APHA's public health partners and its Environment Section, have been distributed to public health associations and environmental health offices in each of the highlighted states. APHA advocacy staff are also using the fact sheets in their outreach to Congress.

The new APHA fact sheets and Web site join an environmental public health brochure and an information booth created

through the Association last year. The booth — along with promotional materials such as T-shirts and stickers — made its debut at the 132nd APHA Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., in November.

To download the fact sheets, visit the Web site at <[www.epps-apha.org](http://www.epps-apha.org)> and click on the link for "APHA Project." For more information on APHA's work, e-mail <[epps@apha.org](mailto:epps@apha.org)> or call (202) 777-2435. ■

— Michele Late



## Become a leader in APHA!

Now is the chance to get involved in your public health association

PHA's boards and committees are now seeking new members. Openings are available on a variety of groups, and members are sought from a range of public health backgrounds.

Step forward now and submit your name for consideration!

For details on openings, duties and qualifications, use your member password to visit [www.apha.org/private/memberd](http://www.apha.org/private/memberd)

For questions or more information, contact Tiffany Emami at (202) 777-2433 or e-mail [tiffany.emami@apha.org](mailto:tiffany.emami@apha.org).



Deadline for submissions is April 15