



JAN 17 2006

Dear Tribal Leader:

Over the past year, a considerable amount of media attention has been focused on the possibility of a pandemic influenza outbreak. Unfortunately, the information given out on this subject often comes from many different sources and can be conflicting and confusing. I believe this to be an important matter, and I am asking for your help in ensuring that all of Indian Country has the most current and correct information on this subject. Our partnership in meeting the health needs of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people takes on additional importance in the face of this challenge; it is our collaborative effort that will make the most appropriate response possible.

First let me say that there is no immediate public health threat due to the avian influenza virus. It is unclear if or when a pandemic influenza will occur. However, if a pandemic should occur, we need to be properly prepared to protect the health of AI/AN people. Even if a pandemic does not strike in the near future, the planning we are doing now is valuable because the preparations for a pandemic influenza can be applied to other public health emergency situations.

I will summarize briefly some background information about pandemic influenza and what the Indian Health Service (IHS) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) are doing to plan for such a possible event.

A pandemic influenza is the global spread of an influenza virus where there is limited human immunity. A pandemic influenza is distinct from the familiar seasonal "flu" viruses. While most humans have some degree of immunity to flu viruses, we would have limited internal immunity to pandemic influenza viruses; therefore, the severity of illness would be greater.

The avian influenza virus strain known as H5N1 that is currently circulating in Asia is considered to be a possible pandemic candidate. To date, the majority of human cases of avian influenza have been among individuals living in close contact with birds (e.g., poultry farmers), and the transmission pattern has only been from bird to human. There have been a few instances of possible human to human transmission, but so far, sustained human to human transmission has not been seen. If the virus evolves to allow more efficient human to human transmission, then a pandemic becomes more likely. Again, there is no concrete evidence that this has yet happened or will happen.

The following are some of the planning activities underway:

- The President released his influenza plan in November 2005 that includes a general HHS plan; the HHS is currently developing a more detailed operational plan.
- The IHS will contribute a more general plan to be included in the HHS plan.

- The IHS has begun an effort to develop a more detailed operational plan that can be used within the Indian Health Service/Tribal Programs/Urban Programs (I/T/U) and also may serve as a template for Tribes to use in developing Tribal-specific plans.
- The IHS will be conducting a test or a "table top" exercise with the IHS Area Chief Medical Officers to deal with a simulation of a pandemic influenza outbreak. This will provide additional information needed to develop local plans.
- Additionally, a planning checklist is being developed that can be used as a local planning guide.

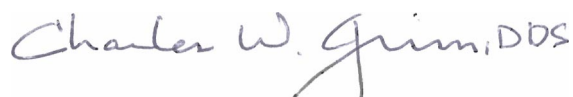
On December 5, 2005, HHS held a *Pandemic Influenza of the States Meeting* to discuss issues such as pandemic influenza planning, antivirals, vaccines, and new research/technologies. Secretary Michael Leavitt emphasized that "pandemic influenza summits" will occur in each of the 50 States over the next 3 months (Minnesota's occurred on December 14). Representatives from HHS will participate in each of these summits, and I strongly encourage you to send your Tribal health leaders. We will keep you informed about the dates of these State summits as that information is made available to us. A major purpose of these meetings is to reach appropriate individuals who will be instrumental in pandemic planning.

The following Web sites contain valuable information on this topic:

- World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic/en>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/flupandemic/qanda.htm>
- HHS Pandemic Influenza Plan: <http://www.hhs.gov/pandemicflu/plan/>

Pandemic influenza planning is a monumental task with many different factors to consider. I believe it is very important that all IHS and Tribal levels collaborate to ensure the most effective and appropriate coordinated response. I have designated Richard Church, Pharm.D., Director of the IHS Office of Public Health Support, to lead the IHS in this planning effort and to serve as the IHS liaison with HHS. I look forward to working with you to help protect the health and welfare of our people.

Sincerely yours,



Charles W. Grim, D.D.S., M.H.S.A.
Assistant Surgeon General
Director