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## **At FHP, public health planning focuses on pandemic flu**

**By Sarah Maxwell**

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Department of Defense and Army medical agencies teamed up to host a pandemic influenza workshop aimed at training military public health professionals on how to deal with a widespread disease outbreak or other public health emergency.

Presented at the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine's 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Force Health Protection Conference held in Louisville, Ky., Aug. 4-11, the one-day workshop delivered a collaboration of the federal government's top disease researchers and emergency planners to about 300 participants from across the services. The workshop was co-sponsored by the DOD Global Emerging Infections Surveillance and Response System, or DOD-GEIS, and CHPPM.

Although experts at the conference said they aren't certain about what the next pandemic disease will be, they all agreed that it's just a matter of time before the world and the U.S. military have to deal with a global epidemic ("pandemic").

"If a pandemic influenza virus emerges, it will not stop at one border or at one installation's gate," said Maj. Duvel "Bill" White, workshop track chief and CHPPM disease epidemiology program manager. "Because the Department of Defense has missions across the globe, we all have to work together in planning for public health emergencies. This type of emergency planning strengthens our Army, our Department of Defense and our nation against many public health threats."

The recent outbreaks of H5N1, commonly referred to as bird flu, along with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS, showed the world that diseases don't stay within political or geographical borders.

Even with SARS being stopped fairly quickly, it still carried a cost in the billions and disrupted societies for several months, according to Dr. Donald Burke, a global authority on infectious diseases. As a retired colonel in Army medicine and now dean of the University of Pittsburgh's School of Public Health, Burke said he lent his expertise to the conference because he believes the military is essential to combating an outbreak.

"How it [DoD] responds to the epidemic will be an important factor as to how well the entire United States responds to the epidemic. So, I felt it was important we were all working together," he said.

The first step to combating a pandemic influenza outbreak is rapid detection, said Dr. Jean Otto, senior epidemiologist for DOD-GEIS and workshop “table-top” exercise planner. Interconnected with laboratories, hospitals and world health agencies across the planet, specifically in high-risk outbreak areas, GEIS is constantly surveying indicators of where a disease eruption could happen.

Otto explained that if an outbreak were detected, the next step would be to work with other agencies to contain it. If for some reason these steps didn’t suppress it, there would be a possibility it could spread to the United States or affect troops deployed across the globe. Since that potential exists, the need for military health professionals to be trained and ready to take on a pandemic is essential.

The workshop addressed the issue with about half a dozen experts explaining in detail the threat of a possible PI outbreak and its potential repercussions. They presented the latest research gathered in both the national and global arenas. Attendees then applied this information in the table-top exercise designed by Otto to help them understand their roles at the installation level. The exercise took participants through local installation public health emergency responses from the initial outbreak through the aftermath of an influenza pandemic.

White said CHPPM and DOD-GEIS wanted specifically to reach out to more than 100 Public Health Emergency Officers who attended the conference, because they are the ones who serve as public health emergency planners and advisors to installation commanders. PHEOs are typically hospital commanders or public health experts designated as installation public health threat subject-matter experts.

“They’re where the rubber meets the road,” said Otto. “We want to establish situational awareness of the kinds of scenarios that we could face in a pandemic—specifically the kinds of issues the Public Health Emergency Officer would have to grapple with—helping them become aware.”

Knowing how to work with the civilian community, understanding command and communication structures to pass vital medical information, delivering patient care, and managing infection control are just some of the issues military healthcare professionals would deal with during a pandemic emergency. Although the workshop focused on influenza, this kind of public health emergency planning and training could have much wider applications, Otto said.

“Whether it be pandemic influenza or some other disease, being able to meet and become familiar with their counterparts in other agencies and establishing relationships ahead of time will facilitate a more rapid and efficient response for other diseases,” she added.

**-End-**

*The U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine is the Army’s public health organization. It supports Soldiers around the world with health education information and deploys its expert medical and scientific staff to deliver occupational and environmental health surveillance everywhere Soldiers go. On U.S. military installations, CHPPM provides environmental health engineering and health hazard assessments as well as injury and disease prevention programs.*

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