

Swine Flu Panic Attack Reaches India

Naazneen Karmali, 08.11.09, 5:03 AM ETMUMBAI -

Four months after the first outbreak of swine flu, India is discovering how deadly this virus can be. The country's first swine flu death, that of a 14-year-old schoolgirl on Aug. 3, followed by seven more patients succumbing to the disease in the span of a week, has set off a panic attack that is spreading faster than the virus itself.

Pune, in Western India, with a population of nearly 4 million, has become the epicenter of the disease for India. Five of the eight victims, including a doctor and a chemist, were residents of this city that is home to automakers Tata Motors and Bajaj Auto, both of which have major factories on its outskirts. Lately, Pune has become a major tech hub with outsourcing, software and biotech companies setting up big campuses in the city. The latest victim, another Pune schoolgirl, died this morning.

A federal government team is stationed in Pune, East of Mumbai, to monitor the situation. In a bid to contain the spread of swine flu, the government yesterday shut down Pune's schools and colleges for a week, and closed malls and cinema multiplexes for three days. Schools in Mumbai, India's financial capital, which is located 100 miles from Pune, have begun to close down too after the city reported its first swine flu death on the weekend. Both cities are located in the state of Maharashtra, which given its location on the western coast, is a major entry point for foreign travelers who are the main carriers of the disease so far.

The Indian government has installed compulsory health screening facilities for passengers from flu-affected countries at 22 international airports, according to a recent update by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad assured worried citizens that India has plenty of Tamiflu, the drug used to treat swine flu. It has not yet been put on open sale in India.

India has reported a total of 959 cases of swine flu and eight deaths. According to the latest bulletin from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 4,513 people have been tested so far.

The creeping death toll has caused a panicky populace to flock to government-run hospitals to get themselves screened for the virus. The collected samples are sent to designated state-owned labs for testing. Such is the rush that the federal government has recently permitted private hospitals and labs to pitch in.

Swine flu is already a global pandemic, with more than 160,000 cases and 1,154 deaths recorded worldwide, according to the World Health Organization. In fact, swine flu hit India later than many countries, which are already contending with the uncheckable spread of the disease.

Because swine flu is a new virus, no one in the world had immunity to it when it came on the scene earlier this year, so it is spreading quickly. Fortunately it has proved a relatively mild flu for most people.

Drugmakers around the world are rushing to produce the swine flu vaccine by this fall.

While three Indian firms have already begun working to develop the swine flu vaccine, the minister has stated that the country will import the vaccine until the local version becomes available. Suresh Jadhav, executive director of Serum Institute of India, one of the three firms racing to make the vaccine, said that he expects to send a batch for testing by September and phase 1 clinical trials should start by January. In a best-case scenario, the earliest Serum's vaccine would be available in the market is April, said Jadhav.

Serum has no assured orders for the vaccine from the government so far, but billionaire Cyrus Poonawalla, who owns the firm, which is located in Pune, has decided to set up a manufacturing facility in anticipation of future demand--and, hopefully, windfall profits (See "[Booster Shot](#)").

Meantime, businesses in Pune are trying to soldier on. Software firm Zensar, which is headquartered in the beleaguered city and has 3,700 workers on a 12-acre campus, is taking "eminent precautions," said Vice Chairman and CEO Ganesh Natarajan. The firm has cut out all nonessential travel, and big gatherings or meetings are being avoided. Hourly updates on the situation are provided on the company intranet. The frequency of cleaning, particularly of door handles, has been stepped up.

No one has reported sick so far, but five staff whose children are running a fever have been asked to work out of their homes. The firm, which has 285 clients, of which 70% are located in the US and Europe, has a backup plan to shift ongoing work to its development centers in Hyderabad and Poland if the situation gets any worse, said Natarajan. "But I doubt that will come to pass. The government is acting very fast," he added.

Investors are nonetheless worried, and Mumbai's benchmark Sensex has caught a bit of a fever. It has lost 6% since Aug. 3, falling 915 points to 15,009 yesterday, though today's morning trading showed some signs of recovery.

http://www.forbes.com/2009/08/11/swine-flu-india-markets-health-pune_print.html