

Swine Flu May Cause 90,000 U.S. Deaths, Report Says

By Tom Randall and Alex Nussbaum

Aug. 24 (Bloomberg) -- Swine flu may infect half the U.S. population this year, hospitalize 1.8 million patients and lead to as many as 90,000 deaths, more than twice the number killed in a typical seasonal flu, White House advisers said.

In a report by the [President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology](#), President [Barack Obama](#) today was urged to speed vaccine production and name a senior member of the White House staff, preferably the homeland security adviser, to take responsibility for decision-making on the pandemic. Initial doses should be accelerated to mid-September to vaccinate as many as 40 million people, the advisory group said.

Seasonal flu usually kills about 36,000 Americans, said [Tom Skinner](#), a spokesman for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Swine flu, also called H1N1, causes more severe illness needing hospitalization among younger people than seasonal flu, while leaving people 65 and older relatively unscathed, said [Mike Shaw](#) of the CDC.

"This isn't the flu that we're used to," said [Kathleen Sebelius](#), U.S. Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. "The 2009 H1N1 virus will cause a more serious threat this fall. We won't know until we're in the middle of the flu season how serious the threat is, but because it's a new strain, it's likely to infect more people than usual."

Data from clinical trials to assess the safety and effectiveness of swine flu vaccines will start to become available in mid-September, health officials reported Aug. 21. Full results from the two-dose trials won't be available until mid October.

Mid-October Vaccine

"We are making every preparation effort assuming a safe and effective vaccine will be available in mid-October," Sebelius said today at the CDC's Atlanta offices.

According to what the advisory report describes as a "plausible scenario," 30 percent to 50 percent of the country's population will be infected in the fall and winter. As many as 300,000 patients may be treated in hospital intensive care units, filling 50 percent to 100 percent of the available beds, and 30,000 to 90,000 people may die, the report said.

Peter Gross, chief medical officer at [Hackensack University Medical Center](#) in New Jersey, said if the group's scenario comes true, "I think every hospital in America is going to be in a crunch. We'll be hard pressed to deal with those predictions," he said.

Predictions 'Overblown'

The predictions seem "overblown," Gross said, given that swine-flu outbreaks in 1968 and 1957 failed to cause as many deaths, even with medical technology and disease surveillance less advanced than today.

"Influenza, you can make all the predictions you want, but it's more difficult than predicting the weather," Gross said in a telephone interview today, after the advisory report was made public. "If influenza was a stock, I wouldn't touch it."

The 775-bed hospital is planning for an outbreak, upping its order of flu medications and discussing where to put patients if the worst occurs, Gross said.

The President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology is chaired by [John Holdren](#), the director of the White House Office of Science and Technology, [Eric Lander](#), the head of the Broad Institute of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and [Harold Varmus](#), the chief executive officer of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

The 21-member group of scientists and engineers, created by Congress in 1976, advises the president on policy involving scientific matters.

Four Months

H1N1 has already reached more than 170 countries and territories in the four months since being identified, the Geneva-based [World Health Organization](#) said. Swine flu causes similar symptoms as seasonal strains. It has so far resulted in worse than normal flu seasons, with increased hospitalizations and cases of severe illness, the WHO said in an Aug. 12 release.

The median age of those with the pandemic virus has been 12 to 17 years, the WHO said on July 24, citing data from Canada, Chile, Japan, U.K. and the U.S.

"People who get infected with this strain happen to be the healthiest members of our society," said Shaw, associate director of laboratory science at the CDC's flu division, in a presentation today, also at the agency's offices.

The H1N1 strain is genetically related to the 1918 Spanish Flu strain that killed an estimated 50 million people. Variations of the Spanish Flu strain circulated widely until around 1957, when they were pushed aside by other flu strains. People whose first exposure to a flu virus was one of those Spanish Flu relatives may have greater immunity to the current pandemic, Shaw said.

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