Medical Xpress

First swine flu death in Canada, as US cases double

May 8 2009, by Michel Comte

The Americas were back in the spotlight over swine flu fears Friday as Canada announced its first death, the number of US infections almost doubled, and more cases were found in Latin America.

US President Barack Obama warned the United States was not out of the woods yet, as across the nation's northern border a woman in western Alberta province became the first person in Canada to succumb to the disease.

"We have our first fatality in Alberta that is associated with the H1N1 flu," said Andre Corriveau, the province's chief medical officer.

"This is the first one in Canada that we can document that is related to H1N1," he said, adding "there were also a number of underlying medical conditions."

Canada has the third highest number of swine flu infections with 224 cases, but the United States overtook Mexico on Friday to become the country with the most number of patients recording 1,639 cases in 43 states.

Mexico, which was the epicenter of the worldwide epidemic, raised its swine flu death toll to 45, with the confirmed cases going up to 1,319, of which more than half were younger than 20. Two people have also died in the US.

The World Health Organization (WHO) said that 2,500 people in 26 countries had tested positive for the A(H1N1) virus.

As the number of US cases jumped overnight with more tests put in place, Obama warned Americans to remain vigilant.

"We are seeing that the virus may not have been as virulent as we at first feared," Obama said at a Spanish-language town hall meeting at the White House.

"But we are not out of the woods yet. We still have to take precautions."

The US president warned the autumn and winter flu season later in the year could see cases spike again. Health authorities "believe we are going to have to keep on taking precautions and we may have to prepare for an even worse flu season sometime in the fall," he said.

South of the US border, Panama became the latest Central American nation to confirm a case of the A(H1N1) virus while Guatemala said it had two people who had caught the disease. Uruguay also stepped up surveillance at ports and along the border.

Panamanian Health Minister Rosario Turner, urging the public to remain calm, said the unidentified youth, who arrived in the country on a flight from the United States, was in quarantine.

"He is receiving treatment and his condition is stable and does not require hospitalization," she said.

Brazil and Argentina had on Thursday each reported their first cases of the flu -- a new multi-strain believed to be a mix of bird flu and human flu which came together in pigs -- as they head into their winter flu season.

Life in Mexico though was slowly returning to normal after a week-long shutdown with the reopening of schools and tourist sites, Mexico City eateries, theaters and cinemas. Primary schools were due back on Monday.

But authorities remain wary and Canadian airline Air Transat on Friday announced it was extending a suspension of its flights from Canada to Mexico until June 19.

In Hong Kong, still haunted by memories of the 2003 SARS epidemic that killed 300 people there, more than 280 guests and staff were finally allowed to leave a hotel after spending a week in quarantine.

The Mexican guest who tested positive for swine flu and had stayed at the hotel was also released from hospital Friday.

Elsewhere in Asia, Japan's health ministry said it was testing a man and a boy who returned from the United States Friday for that country's first possible swine flu infection.

A first Japanese person was confirmed to have the disease, but not in the country. The victim was a six-year-old boy in Chicago, who had already recovered, the foreign ministry said in Tokyo.

Officials from east and southeast Asian countries meeting in Bangkok meanwhile agreed to increase their stockpiles of anti-flu drugs.

"We cannot afford to let our guards down. A pandemic remains a formidable challenge to our region," said Surin Pitsuwan, secretary general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Swine flu and preparation for possible pandemics will top the agenda when health officials meet from May 18 during the World Health

Organization's annual meeting in Geneva.

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