

Silverton Hospital prepares for flu pandemic with other agencies

Hospital preparing for worst-case

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SILVERTON – While many people have fretted over constant media reports that the world is on the precipice of a pandemic, the Silverton Hospital has been preparing for a large-scale outbreak and other disasters with other area hospitals and Marion County.

Dialogue among Marion County hospitals began months ago, and officials from the hospitals continue to meet on a regular basis to have roundtable discussions about disaster relief and alternative strategies for dealing with a pandemic.

The biggest concern for county officials is how and where area hospitals would treat infected patients. The county estimates that 700 of the 1,475 hospital beds in Marion County belong to the Oregon State Hospital and wouldn't be available for use.

In addition, 60 to 70 percent of the remaining 775 beds in the county are occupied at any given time, meaning there could be a severe shortage of space if thousands of people became ill from a pandemic sickness.

Silverton Hospital has a total of 48 beds, and, according to the Director of Patient Satisfaction Elizabeth Bohnstedt, approximately 30 beds are in use during any given day.

Worldwide, health officials have feared such a pandemic could arise from the avian flu virus, which has been discovered in some countries. The last major pandemic took place between 1918 and 1919 and killed more than 20 million people after infecting 1 billion, and if a pandemic were to strike in the near future, the results could be devastatingly similar.

“We’re obviously in a pandemic situation where you have to triage who is here for the avian flu,” said Silverton Hospital’s Employee Health Nurse Becky Walker. “There’s been a lot of talk about designating facilities or buildings used, like a big church or even Chemawa school.

“If there’s a big influx, I think we’d be able to handle it,” Walker said.

And while there is no clear-cut solution to a large-scale outbreak, Silverton Hospital’s Disaster Preparedness Manager Jamie Baxter said that the regional meetings involve a lot of brainstorming.

“We are given some ideas to look at, and we try to find out possible ways of mitigating the disaster,” Baxter said. “Right now, it seems as if our best defense would be to stretch

the pandemic out over time so we all wouldn't be using our resources at once."

Baxter also emphasized that while preparing for a disaster, it's important for the hospitals to really stick together.

"All the hospitals are looking at how we'd work together," she said. "Should one hospital be the designated flu hospital? Or should we look at multiple triage sites? We really need to increase our preparedness."

Currently, influenza is one of the top two of Silverton Hospital's main concerns, along with the possibility of an earthquake. Baxter said that her concern is not limited to the avian flu, but also the influenza virus in general, as the flu kills many people each season.

"Right now, we're working on a few campaigns to get people to protect themselves," she said. "We have a Cover Your Cough campaign for people, and we are teaching kindergarteners how to wash their hands well. Just practicing good cough etiquette will prevent so many illnesses."

Ultimately, though, Baxter said, it will not be up to the government to care for the people infected with a virus such as the avian flu – it will be up to the individuals and the community. Therefore, she advises people to prepare.

"We need to focus on all of us taking care of each other," she said. "It all comes down to personal preparedness and taking care of neighbors."

Finally, Baxter stressed the importance of simply getting the word out.

"This comes right down to all of us," Baxter said. "We need to get the word out about preparing, being safe and being healthy. Preparation can only be good, if it makes the community healthier."