



Managing Uncertainty: Swine Flu Then and Now

A DISCUSSION FEATURING:

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The White House

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FORUM SESSION ANNOUNCEMENT

FRIDAY, JULY 10, 2009

8:45AM–9:15AM—Breakfast

9:15AM–11:00AM—Discussion

LOCATION

Reserve Officers Association
One Constitution Avenue, NE
Congressional Hall of Honor
Fifth Floor
*(Across from the Dirksen
Senate Office Building)*

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The World Health Organization has recently determined that an outbreak of H1N1 influenza (more colloquially known as Swine Flu) identified in Mexico and the United States in March has advanced to become a pandemic (meaning that there are ongoing community-level outbreaks in many parts of the world). Everyone from local to international authorities is carefully monitoring the pandemic's evolution and trying to determine how best to prepare for further developments.

Within the U.S. federal government, interagency teams are working on all aspects of the pandemic from tracking cases to developing a vaccine. Congress is considering requests from the Obama administration for billions of dollars to combat the virus. Everyone is faced with more questions than answers: How might the pandemic continue to unfold? How might the virus change? Who might be most affected and how severely? Which are the right steps to take to be adequately prepared? How can limited resources be most effectively employed?¹

This is not the first time we have encountered such a virus. In 1976, cases of Swine Flu were detected at a U.S. military base. Concern about the possibility of a widespread epidemic led the U.S. government to launch a massive campaign against the virus, including efforts to vaccinate the entire population. The epidemic never spread from the military base, and the government's campaign was widely considered an overreaction that dealt a considerable blow to the credibility of the government and the public health enterprise.

The Swine Flu Affair: Decision-Making on a Slippery Disease, published in 1978 and recently re-released electronically,² provides a detailed analysis of this earlier encounter with Swine Flu, and has been required reading for students of public health ever since. The authors of the report concluded that the following factors interfered with optimal governmental decision making:

- "Overconfidence by specialists in theories spun from meagre evidence.
- Conviction fueled by a conjunction of some pre-existing personal agendas.
- Zeal by health professionals to make their lay superiors do right.
- Premature commitment to deciding more than had to be decided.

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- Failure to address uncertainties in such a way as to prepare for reconsideration.
- Insufficient questioning of scientific logic and of implementation prospects.
- Insensitivity to media relations and the long-term credibility of institutions.”³

Those involved in responding to the current H1N1 pandemic are making careful study of the lessons to be learned from the first encounter with Swine Flu. Much has changed since the 1970s, but many of the potential pitfalls remain. And the challenge to government of making good decisions in the face of great uncertainty is eternal.

This Forum session will both look back at what was learned from the Swine Flu program of the 1970s and look forward to how the federal government might incorporate those lessons into its response to the current pandemic. It will also examine more generally the challenge of dealing with uncertainty and the tools available and needed to confront that challenge successfully.

The speakers for this session are highly knowledgeable about both the earlier Swine Flu program and the challenges raised by the current pandemic. One is a coauthor of *The Swine Flu Affair*, and the other two are part of the Obama administration’s response to the H1N1 pandemic. They will discuss Swine Flu of the past and present and address the following questions:

- What are the important lessons from the experience with Swine Flu in the 1970s? How might they apply to the current situation?
- What are the key decisions that the federal government must still consider with respect to the H1N1 pandemic in the near and longer term, and what are the major uncertainties it must grapple with in making those decisions?
- What are some analogous circumstances, and what can be learned from them about managing uncertainty?
- How does uncertainty affect the interactions among federal agencies, negotiations between the executive agencies and Congress, and communication with the public?
- What approaches and tools are available for dealing with uncertainty, which are currently being employed, and what additional ones might be helpful?

SPEAKERS

Harvey V. Fineberg, MD, PhD, is the president of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences and the co-author of *The Swine Flu Affair*. Prior to heading the Institute of Medicine, he was provost of Harvard University, having previously served as dean of the Harvard School of Public Health for 13 years. Dr. Fineberg has served on numerous national and international panels and helped to found, and served as president of, the Society for Medical Decision Making.

Peter R. Orszag, PhD, is the director of the Office of Management and Budget in The White House. Previously, he served as the director of the Congressional Budget Office, as special assistant to the President for economic policy, and as a staff economist and then senior advisor and senior economist at the President's Council of Economic Advisers. Dr. Orszag was also a fellow at the Brookings Institution and served as director or co-director of several programs there.

Margaret A. Hamburg, MD, is the commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Prior to her appointment as FDA commissioner, she served as vice president for Biological Programs at the Nuclear Threat Initiative, assistant secretary for Policy and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as the commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and as faculty of the Columbia University School of Public Health and Cornell University Medical College.

ENDNOTES

1. For more information on flu pandemics, see the Forum's "Tick-Tock: Preparing for the Next Influenza Pandemic" (Background Paper, August 27, 2004); available at www.nhpf.org/library/details.cfm/2459.
2. Richard E. Neustadt and Harvey V. Fineberg, *The Swine Flu Affair: Decision-Making on a Slippery Disease*, Harvard University, report to Joseph Califano, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1978, re-released by the Institute of Medicine, May 2009; available at www.iom.edu/CMS/65954.aspx.
3. Neustadt and Fineberg, *The Swine Flu Affair*, p. 1.