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Influx of FLU Patients hits Southwest Regional Medical Center

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WAYNESBURG -- In the last several days, Southwest Regional Medical Center has seen a dramatic increase in the number of patients coming to the emergency department with flu-like symptoms.

In light of these dramatic and sudden increases, Southwest Regional Medical Center has enacted its emergency preparedness plan and initiated its hospital flu command center.

The hospital's emergency room saw 25 patients with flu-like symptoms Saturday; 28 on Sunday; and 35 on Monday. Prior to this past weekend, the number of patients exhibiting symptoms was in the single digits.

"We believe the current H1N1 flu pandemic warrants a swift, strategic and well-planned response as we rapidly see an increase in patients presenting with flu-like symptoms," said Cindy Cowie, chief executive officer of Southwest Regional Medical Center. "We have made a decision to enact our emergency plan to properly treat patients in accordance with the latest (Centers for Disease Control) CDC guidelines."

Meanwhile, at Mon Valley Hospital, the flu situation remains unchanged from last week. "We haven't implemented any restrictions," according to spokesman Kurt Weber. "We're asking our visitors to be cognizant of the flue situation and wash their hands frequently." Though it's not a requirement, hospital officials are suggesting that only two people visit a patient at a time.

Spokeswomen for Canonsburg General and Washington hospitals did not immediately return calls late Wednesday afternoon.

While a significant number of people have been coming to the emergency room, physicians are not testing for H1N1. Dr. Scott Benson, medical director of the Southwest's emergency department, said those coming to the emergency department exhibiting Type A flu symptoms most likely have the H1N1 virus. Similarly, the CDC guidelines recommend that hospitals only test and treat for influenza in very particular situations. The guidelines recommend that most individuals presenting to the emergency departments or physician offices not be tested for the flu. Rather, it should be assumed that patients who meet the clinical criteria have the flu.

The CDC recommends testing for the flu only in individuals requiring hospitalization or for patients in which a flu diagnosis could complicate an underlying medical condition. Likewise, treatment with antivirals, such as Tamiflu, is not recommended unless the patient is:

- Under 2 years of age
- Over 65 years of age
- Pregnant or up to two weeks postpartum (including following pregnancy loss)
- Compromised with a chronic medical or immunosuppressive condition.
- Younger than 19 and receiving long-term aspirin therapy

The following facts support the CDC recommendation:

- Rapid FLU screening testing is only 10 percent to 70 percent sensitive for H1N1 type. Therefore, up to 90 percent of negative Rapid FLU tests could be falsely negative; meaning that a negative Rapid FLU test does not rule out H1N1. CDC recommends Rapid FLU testing with H1N1 confirmation of positives in patients with severe influenza requiring hospitalization to ensure a proper and accurate diagnosis.
- Greater than 90 percent of this year's influenza is expected to be H1N1 type.
- Therefore, diagnosis of suspected influenza, including H1N1 should be made on clinical grounds without using the Rapid FLU test.
- Only those suspected H1N1 influenza patients who are severe (requiring hospitalization) and those who are at high risk for complications require antiviral therapy. Thus, if a patient has suspected H1N1, but does not meet criteria above, they do not need to be treated.

"For most individuals, treatment for the flu means lots of rest, plenty of fluids and staying home until fully recovered," said Benson. "We will not prescribe medication or test for flu unless a patient falls within the CDC recommended guidelines.

"We are here and ready to treat those who are in need of emergency care," Benson said. "It's important for everyone to understand that we, as are most other hospitals, will only test for the flu in cases as recommended by the CDC. Simply speaking, the best treatment remains rest, fluids and staying home from work or school."

In order to properly prepare for the pandemic, the hospital has been working to ensure they have adequate resources to respond to the needs of the community. In

working with the Greene County Emergency Management Agency, the hospital has acquired cots for a special flu-triage and treatment area located in the hospital.

The area will be located in the second-floor Guesman Room. Patients presenting to the emergency department can still enter the same entrance. If they are having flu-like symptoms they will be directed to the Guesman Room for care.

"This plan will help us to ensure that we are effectively triaging and treating patients presenting with symptoms while minimizing exposure to other patients coming to the hospital for care," said Mike Onsuko, Southwest Regional's emergency planning coordinator. "We are also offering masks to all those presenting with flu-like symptoms and have extended the hours for medical providers to ensure accessibility to care and treatment."

"The CDC is the governmental agency that guides us on handling pandemics, such as the H1N1," Cowie said. "We want everyone to know that we are here and fully prepared to handle any emergency situations which may result from the H1N1 pandemic. At the same time, we also want patients to understand that most cases of H1N1 will resolve with simple rest, fever-reducing medication and fluids."