

Flu pandemic medical help left in the waiting room

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GPs are not an integral part of Australian influenza planning, despite the important role they will play in limiting deaths in the event of a pandemic hitting the country, according to research from The Australian National University.

Researchers from the University's National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health and ANU Medical School examined 89 Australian and international pandemic response plans and found general practice involvement was limited, and sometimes not considered.

Research lead Associate Professor Mahomed Patel says international evidence from the SARS outbreaks and influenza epidemics illustrates GPs and allied health professionals have an important role to identify and treat cases, take on hospital workload and continue to support the chronically ill in the event of an outbreak.

“Studies in other countries show that during public health emergencies, most people prefer to see their GPs whom they trust and have a good relationship with. Yet most plans focused on the responses by health departments with little reference to collaborations with GPs,” he said.

Despite health experts around the world saying a pandemic was a ‘when not if’ scenario, pandemic planning is still not seen as an activity to be jointly prepared by health departments, general practitioners and hospitals, Dr Patel added.

“With over 97 million visits annually, general practice is Australia’s single largest health sector. If we do not prepare it well, our responses will fail in critical points during an influenza pandemic,” he said.

The researchers have devised a framework to guide planning to include general practice covering clinical care for influenza and other conditions, public health responsibilities, the internal environment of general practice and interactions within the broader health system.

General practice coordination was identified as an area of need during Exercise Cumpston 2006, which tested systems for an influenza outbreak, and national guidelines for primary care providers are being developed, the researchers said. The researchers also emphasise the need to move beyond a paper exercise in planning, to drills, simulations and continuing collaboration among people who will need to pull together in a crisis situation.

Source: Australian National University

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