

Using the internet to teach, learn about and prepare for pandemic influenza

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Flu Wiki www.fluwikie.com

Introduction

On-line since June 2005, Flu Wiki is a collaborative web site that exists to collect and disseminate information about pandemic influenza preparation. The collaborators and the audience are the general public and anyone else with an interest in the topic, including public health officials.

The preparations required to mitigate an influenza pandemic are beyond anything public health or governments officials can do alone. An on-line community, with the help and participation of experts, is able to come up with solutions and ideas¹ to supplement the work of official agencies, especially where existing solutions are absent or incomplete.

Government web sites can provide authoritative information, but generally lack interactivity and may not cover areas outside their responsibilities or where there is as yet no official consensus. Non-governmental internet resources supplement official sources of information² by providing the kind of two way communication that allows public debate, participation, and other tools that both engage and educate the public on how best to prepare.

Since anyone can contribute to the wiki, real-time updates add to the immediacy of the on-line collaboration. Links and other resources round out the experience, resulting in an information-rich site anyone can use with minimum learning curve.

Description

Flu Wiki is an interactive "wiki" website, accompanied by a conversation space structured like a traditional web log or "blog". A wiki is software that not only allows content addition like a blog, but allows collective editing to produce a final product. No registration is required to add material to the wiki. Registration is required for comment in the Forum. Both sites are moderated by the same individuals; inappropriate comment and commercial links are removed.

The software used for Flu Wiki is PnWiki, a program written by Peter Michaud. The current Flu Wiki Forum, the conversational space for the on-line Flu Wiki community, runs on Soapbox. Together, the two sites have had over two million unique visits and over 11 million page views as measured by Site Meter.

Figure 1. Screen shot of Flu Wiki's main page



Projects

The Flu Wiki community has voluntarily and spontaneously organized themselves into 'projects' meant to further the education of other on-line and off-line users.

For example, while public officials from all over the world have access to plans and planning at every level, members of the community have prepared and posted slide shows and presentations that anyone can access and use in addressing local school boards, community groups, civic organizations, etc., about pandemic preparedness. Access to Flu Wiki's downloadable file storage site is posted on the wiki. Coupled with the rich content already posted elsewhere on the internet, and with the links provided, wiki users can educate themselves and community members on issues pertaining to pandemics, including tips on creating and producing presentations.

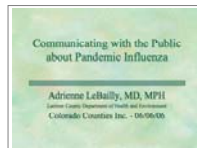


Figure 2. Presentation donated to Flu Wiki for download and use by the public.

Another project of interest is news tracking. Volunteers search the internet for influenza news from all over the world. Indonesia, for example, has reported more deaths from H5N1 than any other country. Using Toggletext or other translation software, and supplemented by native speakers, volunteers track local reports of hospitalized and suspected cases of H5N1 in birds and humans.

Other volunteers create maps and lists, helping to detail any spike in cases that local news media reports. Official sources, particularly WHO, are considered by community members to be the gold standard of reporting. However, the full reporting of test results is often slow and sometimes incomplete. Negative testing in countries like Turkey have been reported to be negative before reporting as positive. The engagement by community members allows for greater confidence in official results and allows for constructive questioning when media reports do not match official results for whatever reason. On-line detailed postings might allow officials to know where to concentrate their own efforts.

Figure 3. Indonesia map by volunteers using ArcView 8.3



More Projects

Individuals in the world-wide community of readers have requested use of the wiki and forum space for the purposes of local preparedness and communication. For example, volunteers have translated content into Norwegian, Spanish, French and Turkish.



Figure 4. Site Meter screenshot of visitors to Flu Wiki

Our Caribbean readership has requested to use the Flu Wiki and Forum in training exercises and workshops designed to further both pre- and inter-pandemic communication.



Figure 5. Screenshot of Caribbean Forum diary. Area residents can post comments here and add links such as news sources and official plans to the Flu Wiki page dedicated to the Caribbean (including CARICOM) countries.

Integration between the two sites allows for listing of links and factual data on the wiki and conversation on the forum. Examples of topics covered include school closings, water resources, food storage and meal planning on a limited budget, physician guides to basic home care (assuming hospitals will be full and people will be asked to self-treat) and mass-casualty preparations.

In many cases, more questions than answers exist, and the ability to begin to address the lack of definitive answers lends itself to debate, discussion and an informed citizenry. Areas such as personal stockpiling of tamiflu and the use of masks by the general population are examples of how discussion with authoritative links (where available) have contributed to the understanding by the on-line community of the need for protection of health care workers, the issue of supply shortage and the concept of triage, and rationing when supplies are limited. An ethics section and links to the Toronto SARS experience are examples of using data and experience to avoid panic and anticipate problems before they occur.

Conclusions

The purpose of the Flu Wiki is to help local communities prepare for and perhaps cope with a possible influenza pandemic. But it is likely previously ceded to local, state and national governmental public health agencies. Our goal is to be:

- a reliable source of information, as neutral as possible, about important facts useful for a public health approach to pandemic influenza
- a venue for anticipating the vast range of problems that may arise if a pandemic does occur
- a venue for thinking about implementable solutions to foreseeable problems

No one, in any health department or government agency, knows all the things needed to cope with an influenza pandemic. But it is likely someone knows something about some aspect of each of them and if we can pool and share our knowledge we can advance preparation for and the ability to cope with events. This is not meant to be a substitute for planning, preparation and implementation by civil authorities, but a parallel effort that complements, supports and extends those efforts.

Projects initiated by the Flu Wiki community include exchange of audio-visual materials for presentations, use of the websites for international communication, and building of a library of relevant reference material.

Literature cited

- ¹ Surowiecki, James. *The Wisdom Of Crowds*. Doubleday, 2004
- ² Harvard School of Public Health Avian Flu Survey (on-line publication), February 23, 2006, http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/press/releases/blendon/Avian_Flu_Release_Topline.doc

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For further information

See the Flu Wiki web site at www.fluwikie.com or contact us at forumadmin@fluwikie.com