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Many U.S. Schools Are Unprepared for Another Pandemic

Washington, DC, August 30, 2012 – Less than half of U.S. schools address pandemic preparedness in their school plan, and only 40 percent have updated their school plan since the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, according to a study published in the September issue of the American Journal of Infection Control, the official publication of the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC).

A team of researchers from Saint Louis University collected and analyzed survey responses from approximately 2,000 school nurses serving primarily elementary, middle, and high schools in 26 states to ascertain whether schools were prepared for another pandemic, particularly focusing on infectious disease disasters. Pandemic preparedness is critical not only because of ramifications of the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, but also because of the threat of a future pandemic or an outbreak of an emerging infectious disease, such as severe acute respiratory syndrome. School preparedness for all types of disasters, including biological events, is mandated by the U.S. Department of Education.

The team found that less than one-third of schools (29.7 percent) stockpile any personal protective equipment, and nearly a quarter (22.9 percent) have no staff members trained on the school’s disaster plan. One-third (33.8 percent) of schools report training students on infection prevention less than once per year. Only 1.5 percent of schools report stockpiling medication in anticipation of another pandemic. On a positive note, although only 2.2 percent of schools require school nurses to receive the annual influenza vaccine, the majority (73.7 percent) reported having been vaccinated for the 2010/2011 season.

“Findings from this study suggest that most schools are even less prepared for an infectious disease disaster, such as a pandemic, compared to a natural disaster or other type of event,” says Terri Rebmann, PhD, RN, CIC, lead study author and associate professor of Environmental and Occupational Health at the Saint Louis University School of Public Health. “Despite the recent H1N1 pandemic that disproportionately affected school-age children, many schools do not have plans to adequately address a future biological event.”

The researchers conclude that U.S. schools must continue to address gaps in infectious disease emergency planning, including developing better plans, coordinating these plans with local and regional disaster response agency plans, and testing the plan through disaster drills and exercises. Whenever possible, school nurses should be involved in these planning efforts, as healthcare professionals can best inform school administrators about unique aspects of pandemic planning that need to be included in school disaster plans.

The full text of the article is available to journalists upon request; contact Liz Garman, APIC at 202-454-2604, egarman@apic.org to obtain copies.
ABOUT AJIC: AMERICAN JOURNAL OF INFECTION CONTROL
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NOTES FOR EDITORS
“U.S. School/Academic Institution Disaster and Pandemic Preparedness and Seasonal Influenza Vaccination Among School Nurses” by Terri Rebmann, Michael B. Elliott, Dave Reddick, and Zachary Swick appears in the American Journal of Infection Control, Volume 40, Issue 7 (September 2012).

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