

SWINE FLU

Information Sheet and Practical Guidance for HR Practitioners

Introduction

The City HR Association organised a member symposium to discuss the wealth of information available regarding Swine Flu and the steps that individual organisations were taking to deal with this issue.

The session was hosted and facilitated by Andrew Davenport and James Taylor, Simmons & Simmons, together with medical advice provided by an expert speaker, Dr. Charlie Easmon.

All parties agreed that an Information Sheet would be produced providing a checklist of issues to be considered by HR practitioners for the benefit of City HR members and HR colleagues. This document is the outcome of the facilitated discussion panel and sets out to provide a commentary on current City practice together with a checklist of actions that can be taken and a summary list of information sources.

What is Swine Flu?

The National Health Service defines this as a respiratory disease which has some elements of a virus found in pigs.

What are the symptoms?

According to the NHS guidelines, some of the symptoms are the sudden onset of fever, cough or shortness of breath. Other symptoms can include headache, sore throat, tiredness, aching muscles, chills, sneezing, runny nose or loss of appetite.

How does seasonal flu differ from a pandemic?

According to Dr. Charlie Easmon, seasonal flu happens every year, usually around September and attacks 5% - 15% of the population. Its UK mortality rate is in the region of 3,000 to 12,000 individuals. The elderly and people whose immune system has been suppressed by other illnesses are most vulnerable to death. The Government vaccinates 14 million people every year.

Conversely, a pandemic occurs approximately once every 33 years, is not seasonal and attacks around 30% - 40% of the population. It lasts for a minimum of 9 months and then comes in further waves. Swine Flu started in April, so strictly speaking it is not yet a pandemic, but the medical profession is waiting to see if further waves occur.

Who is most vulnerable?

Dr. Easmon cited those who are pregnant or obese or those with a suppressed immune system or major respiratory problems.

Medication

Tamiflu is the traditional option prescribed by Doctors with a medication called Relenza being an occasional alternative.

What happens if someone thinks they have swine flu?

It was suggested that individuals ring the established NHS Direct helpline on 0845 4647 (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) or the National Pandemic Flu Services on 0800 1513 513 (www.direct.gov.uk/swineflu) to see if their symptoms match those associated with swine flu. If this is the case, the individual should remain at home to avoid infecting other staff. Alternatively, they can call their GP, but should not visit the surgery if Tamiflu is prescribed and a 'flu friend' should be sent to pick up the prescription.

On average, the individual should remain away from the office for up to 7 days, although those suffering from Swine Flu (as with seasonal flu) may need longer to recuperate.

What about expatriate staff in the UK?

Human Resource Practitioners should take extra care to ensure that they have registered with a GP on their arrival in the UK and check that the expatriate staff member has someone to be their 'flu friend'.

And employees travelling abroad?

Ideally, employees should stick to essential travel or research their destination to understand the risk of infection – or being diagnosed with swine flu – in that region. This can be researched via the Foreign & Commonwealth Office on www.fco.gov.uk/en/. Above all, HR practitioners could suggest that the individual seeks independent medical advice on whether to travel. In the City HR symposium only a very small number were providing – or considering – swine flu packs for those travelling abroad.

What about Business Continuity Planning?

A suggested approach is contained in the checklist on page 2 of this document. A key consideration is the potential closure of schools in the event of a pandemic as well as provision for working from home.

It was suggested that companies should look at the demographics of their business, particularly at the number of female workers (or prime carers) with children under the age of 14, as this population may need emergency time off to care for dependents in the event of school closures.

In terms of home working, this could apply to various categories of staff, including those effectively in quarantine. However, it was recognised that City firms may have difficulties with allowing their traders to operate from home.

Additional hygiene methods?

Most companies attending the symposium had increased hygiene through the provision of of:-

- Antibacterial handwash in the reception and individual offices within their building
- Stricter cleaning controls with office cleaning conducted twice daily in some organisations. Also ensuring the regular sterilisation of door handles, PCs, telephones and other 'communal equipment' via their cleaning company
- Greater dialogue with their cleaning company, to ensure that optional standards are being applied. Also the purchase of antibacterial and sterilising products via their cleaning company to encourage greater usage of these products.

Some data from organisations attending the symposium

- 90% of organisations had experienced at least one staff member with swine flu
- Around 50% have a swine flu policy
- The remainder rely on Government or their Medical Provider updates
- All firms were communicating with staff on swine flu, ranging from general advice on absence, travel and hygiene to providing latest medical expert advice
- Only 2 organisations had stockpiled Tamiflu but around 50% had their company Doctor on standby to deal with emergency cases
- A large number were keeping a watching brief on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for international travel updates
- One company issued masks
- One company issue thermometers for staff to make a daily temperature check
- All companies had stepped up cleaning and hygiene and most had handwash and wipes readily available.

Two legal pointers:

Companies must comply with their legal obligations to do all that is reasonable practicable to ensure the health and safety of their staff. It should be noted that what is considered to be reasonable is not a static response and is likely to evolve as the pandemic progresses. Official guidance can assist in helping determine what is considered to be reasonable, likewise, sharing experience with peers and professional organisations will also assist in determining what preventative steps are being adopted and whether there is a general consensus on what are reasonable measures.

It is recommended that companies formally risk assess the specific risks posed by Swine Flu and to record this in writing. This assessment should be kept up-to-date and it is important to ensure that any recommended mitigation measures are actioned or closed off.

Finally, a point of caution

These notes and the associated checklist, are the outcome of a City HR Association symposium and are for guidance purposes only. Organisations have a common law and statutory duty to promote the well-being of their employees. This needs to be done in a way that ensures both organisational business continuity and legal obligations are key factors in decision making and that solutions demonstrate both creativity and flexibility.

Regular bulletins are available via the Chief Medical Officer, the NHS, the World Health Organisation and the Health Protection Agency whose details are given on the accompanying checklist.

It is strongly recommended that organisations regularly review the advice given and print off any guidance given on these websites to substantiate their decision-making on the day it appears. Please note that as the websites get updated, the information (quite rightly) takes on a new dimension so guidance that was adhered to in June may not still be there in September! It is therefore advisable to keep a hard copy information source so that the basis of decisions can be understood at a later date.

The following checklist is a quick reference Swine Flu Information Guide which companies may wish to adapt for their own purposes.

SWINE FLU CHECKLIST

HR Advice to Employees who may be Affected

If at home either:

- telephone own GP or
- call the NHS Direct helpline on 0845 4647 or
- call National Pandemic Flu Services on 0800 1513 513

If at work:

- call Human Resources to see if a referral to Company Doctor is warranted or
- call numbers outlined above and go home if case is confirmed or suspected

Ensure that all expatriate staff are registered with a GP or provide Company Doctor details

Ensure that all expatriate staff have a flu friend

How to Obtain Anti Viral Drugs

Advise employee to contact own General Practitioner, the NHS helpline or the National Pandemic Flu Service

Alternatively, employees may be referred to Company Doctor

HR could consider:-

- Stockpiling Tamiflu (small number of companies have done so) or
- Appointing a private supplier (such as Company Doctor)

Encourage employees to seek medical advice before travelling about obtaining drugs if ill overseas

Consider issuing Swine Flu packs to employees undertaking essential business travel

Practical Steps to Minimising Swine Flu

Hygiene

- Provide handwipes, handgel and other products to reduce spread of germs
- Use wipes for computers and telephone equipment
- Put up general health posters such as "Coughs and Sneezes Spread Diseases" or posters encouraging health precautions
- Provide regularly advice and updates on health and hygiene via
 - Email
 - Intranet
 - Regular bulletins

Cleaning

- Liaise with cleaning company to ensure cleaners are cleaning properly
- Consider increasing to twice a day
- Set standards with the cleaners
- Consider buying cleaning products via your company to encourage greater usage

Flexible working

- Consider home working for those affected/potentially affected
- Consider different arrival and leaving times for vulnerable staff

Impose quarantine of up to 7 days for those affected/potentially affected

Health and safety

- identify what is good practice as H&S risk will increase as the pandemic moves forward
- continue knowledge sharing via websites, company medical advisors, Government sources, World Health sources and other organisations

Business Contingency Planning (BCP)

Review Bird Flu Policies and update with Swine Flu information

Design a Swine Flu policy

Check employee demographics in case of large scale Swine Flu absence

- Number of female workers or prime dependents with children under 14 who would be affected by school closures
- Number of vulnerable staff (eg pregnant women, staff with respiratory or immune issues) to see if commuting arrangements should be varied or work from home
- Areas where staff levels cannot fall beneath a certain level

Establish a centralised reporting system

- Track absence and consider resourcing needs

Establish work from home and flexible working arrangements

Determine Business Travel Policy – limit to essential travel only

Institute good communications

Regularly review Government, Medical Provider and world health advice to moderate business operations

Ask key suppliers about their business contingency planning

Role of HR in Swine Flu

In most organisations, HR will play a key role in Swine Flu advice, reporting and administration

Act as a hub

Review or develop related HR policies:

- either update sickness / domestic leave / flexible working / absence policy or
- design specific policy

Provide regular management information

- collation of data
- update senior management on latest Swine Flu advice

Provide regular staff communication

- On medical advice, business contingency plans, what to do if affected, options for flexible working and overseas business travel advice
- Via updates, bulletins, email, intranet, posters

Employee relations

- contact legal department or employment lawyers if unsure on how to handle sensitive cases relating to vulnerable staff or unforeseen issues arising from Swine Flu procedures
- document any advice given – on the date it is given – together with any relevant download from internet as foundation for key business decisions.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND LATEST GUIDANCE

NHS Direct helpline: 0845 4647

NHS website: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Health Protection Agency website: www.hpa.org.uk

CMO (Chief Medical Officer):
www.dh.gov.uk/en/Aboutus/MinistersandDepartmentLeaders/ChiefMedicalOfficer

World Health Organisation website: www.who.int

Foreign & Commonwealth Office: www.fco.gov.uk/en

Simmons & Simmons publication:
Swine flu – an employer's international checklist