

Emergency Planning to Cope with a Pandemic

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The outbreak of bird flu has woken us up to the realities we may face but the real test is how well we prepare for it.

People the world over are being warned of the potential damage avian influenza could cause to their health. However, situations such as this could have less damaging affects if people took the time to plan ahead and put an emergency plan in place.

A pandemic would mean many people would become sick which would significantly affect work places, schools, hospitals and many other services.

Depending on the type of business the scale of preparation would differ throughout various companies. Larger enterprises such as those that provide essential services or infrastructure, should maintain a reasonably high level of awareness.

Smaller workplaces and those providing "non-essential" services will also benefit significantly if they are prepared for an outbreak in New Zealand. Planning could reduce the cost and improve business viability during and after a pandemic.

Employers have a responsibility to take all practicable steps to reduce the risk and protect employees from becoming a victim of pandemic influenza. Putting a plan in place would ultimately help employers reduce that risk.

No one knows how long a pandemic may last and there could be more than one wave of infection during the pandemic period, with each wave possibly lasting for eight weeks. The Ministry of Health has advised businesses to plan for up to 50 per cent of staff absences during that time.

Continuity planning for a pandemic should include:

- Identification of essential business activities (and the core people and skills to keep them running), and ensuring that these are backed-up with alternative arrangements.
- Mitigation of business/economic disruptions, including possible shortages of supplies.
- Minimising illness in workers and customers.
- Reducing fear and communicating to staff and stakeholders what the business plans to do to in case of a pandemic.

Identifying key people and the skills required to keep your business operating is important and your pandemic plan should also consider how to minimize illness among staff and visitors.

Other areas of the plan outlined include hygiene notices to be put up around your work place, work place cleaning and what products to use, air conditioning, distancing yourself from people socially and how to manage staff when they become ill at work.

The key to preparing for the possible pandemic would be to plan early and to open up a line of communication between staff.