



From Flu to Salmonella: Cooperation between Private Physicians and Public Health Protects All of Us

Bruce Parsons

F-L-U. It's amazing how three simple letters can wreak such havoc and yet bind us together as a healthcare community in a few short weeks. The cough, sore throats, fever and body aches have brought with them a renewed commitment of cooperation, communication, and concern between private health care providers and the Department of Public Health.

Thanks to the vigilance of our local healthcare providers, our epidemiological reporting system began to show signs of the flu season as early as October of last year. In November our team began preparing for a flu epidemic when the reporting system showed 211 confirmed cases of the virus. By December our epidemiological, immunization, and call center staffs were in full outbreak mode. In December 1,704 cases were reported, eight times as many cases as November. Reported flu cases in the previous two years paled in comparison to what we were seeing for late 2012. Fortunately, the outbreak appeared to peak in early January.

Unfortunately, the 2012-13 flu season has been more than an inconvenience for the over 3,300 afflicted and their families. For five

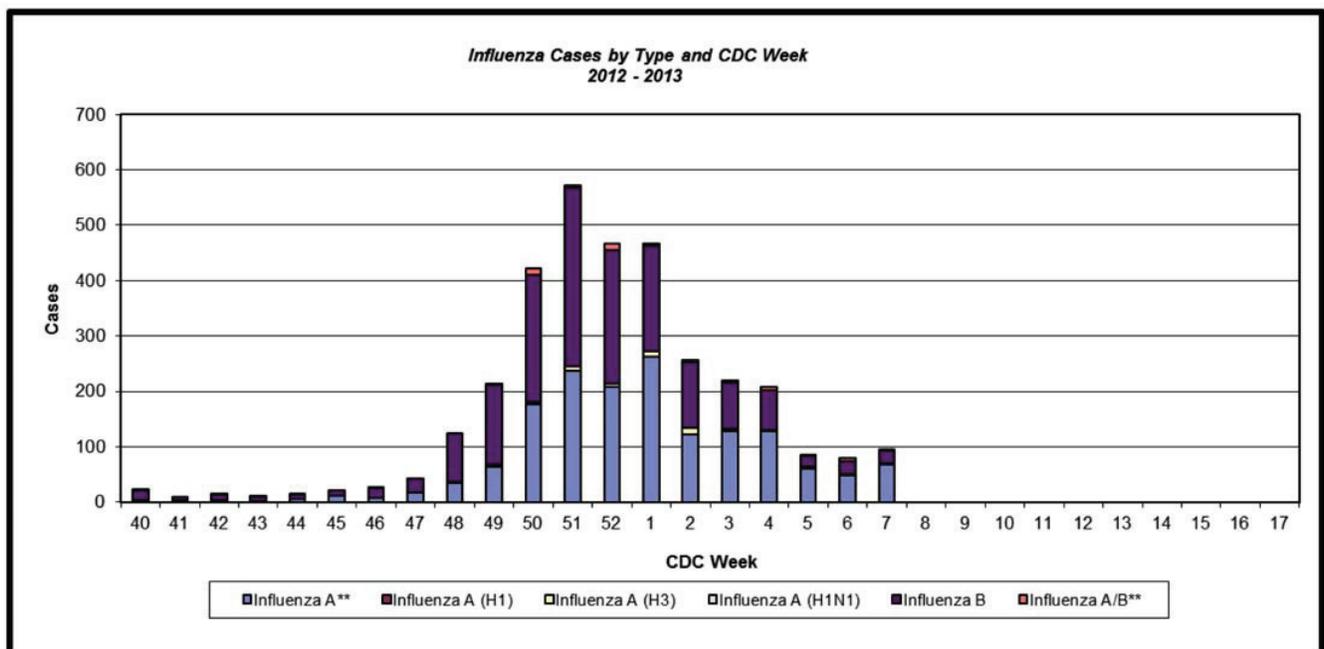
of our residents with underlying health conditions, the flu virus proved deadly.

As a part of the effort to reduce the incidence of influenza in the community, the epidemiology program sent out thousands of informational brochures and continues to use social media to help educate the public on flu prevention. Additionally, the health department's Immunization Program, private physicians, and retail pharmacies are inoculating children and adults in order to prevent more infection.

Active surveillance is the key to understanding disease trends and developing plans for community education and vaccination. Reporting of influenza by local doctors, hospitals, nursing homes and other healthcare providers is crucial to monitoring changes in influenza patterns and targeting our resources to populations at greatest risk.

"The surveillance of influenza has important practical uses for controlling the spread and severity of epidemic episodes. Active

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reporting of influenza cases by primary care physicians and specialists is essential in making this happen,” said Yvonne Vasquez, Department of Health Epidemiologist.

The Department continues to urge medical providers to administer flu vaccine and to take necessary precautions to avoid spreading the disease in clinical settings.

EIGHT MULTI-STATE, TURTLE-RELATED SALMONELLA OUTBREAKS

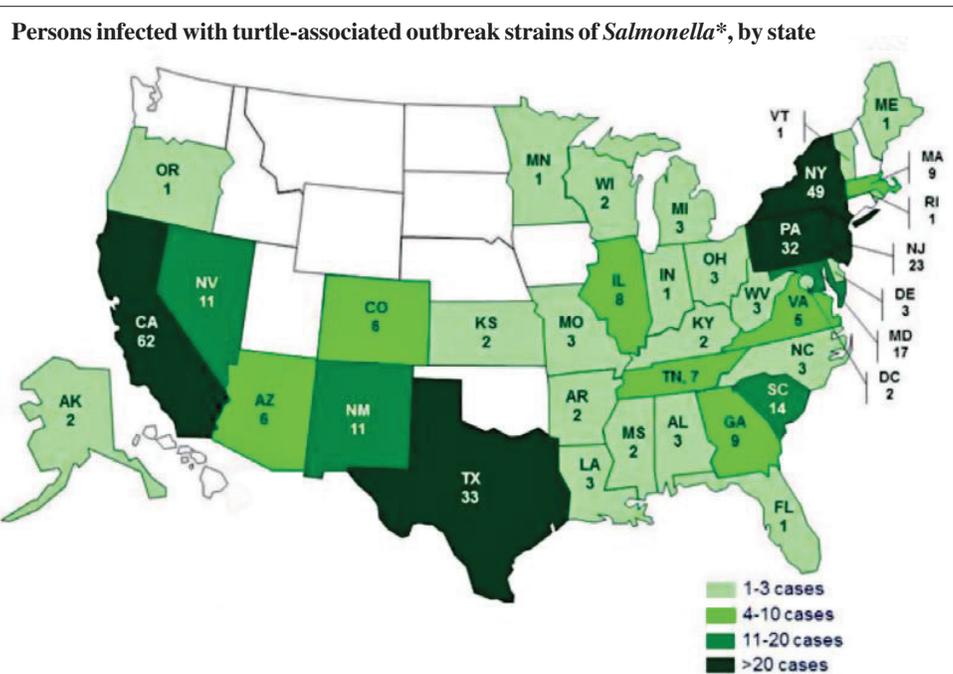
The Epidemiology Program is also working on an emerging health concern after a reported multi-state Salmonella outbreak involving handling of small turtles. Texas has reported 33 cases in the last year. A recent case of the disease in El Paso may be linked to the touching of small turtles that are illegally sold or distributed as pets.

“Many people do not know that turtles can carry harmful bacteria that can make people very sick. Because of this health danger, turtles might not be the best pets for a family, especially if there are young children or people with weakened immune systems living in the household,” said Vasquez.

The fact is that both state and federal law (In Texas: Title 21 CFR 1240.62 and Code of Federal Regulations Title 21) prohibit the sale of turtles less than 4 inches in size, but Vasquez notes that the current trend is to give the turtles away at local fairs and festivals as a game prize or in some cases giving them away with the purchase of a small turtle aquarium.

Whether they are sold or given away, it is the distribution of these turtles that is considered illegal and staff is working to educate local entrepreneurs on the regulations. In 2012 one case of Salmonella was associated with an infected turtle in El Paso. In that case, the patient was treated and survived.

The health department is urging area pediatricians and family physicians to educate parents on the dangers of keeping small turtles as pets for their young children. These small turtles may be cute; silent; and require little maintenance as a pet. However, they are not good for the health of your family. Together, we can send the word.



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