

12-31-09

## H1N1 and More, in Theory and in Practice

*“In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But, in practice, there is.”* (This quote is attributed to various people. It sounds more wise-guy-Yogi Berra-ish than computer scientist but I don’t know for sure who said it first.)

And, boy, did we ever experience the difference between the two this year! I did not open the binder on Emergency Dispensing Sites. I could not use the pre-made signs announcing Plenty of Medicine for All. I know of highly paid emergency planners who proved to be useless. It was a time for doing and we did.

Although it certainly became The Year of Swine Flu, turned pandemic, turned H1N1, that is not all that happened in my little town, by any means. The fresh ponds were filled with more algae than ever. CDC and MA DPH are studying the problem and Halifax’s West Monponsett Pond is one of only a handful in Massachusetts being sampled. The algae hung around well into December, causing beaches to stay closed and emergency response teams being frequently called to check on odor complaints of a “gas-like smell”. It was the algae every time. This will continue to be a hot, and smelly, topic for 2010.

Unbeknownst to many, my year began with months of literature review on our recently capped landfill. A new engineering firm was hired to monitor it and the former engineering firm was asked why they had not followed the proposed plan, approved by DEP, for allowing an area to be used for composting. After much denial and finger pointing, the town only recently accepted an offer from the former engineers and the contractor that will fund the required warning strips to be placed in the composting area. No one admitted fault, of course. Now, if composting is to ever return, it is time to use those funds for their intended purpose. I am sure, however, that it must be oh, so tempting to use them for something else. Here’s an opportunity to speak up and find out. Ask the town how these funds will be used.

Just as I was clearing my office of boxes and boxes of landfill documents, the swine flu was spreading around the world. Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you first heard the news? I received a call from a friend telling me to turn on the television and see the reports of this illness coming back to the US from Mexico. I remember the map lighting up here and there with the latest reports and I remember when it acquired pandemic status. I also remember how my stomach gripped at the news.

While it fortunately did not turn into the 1918 scene with mass graves for the millions of dead, it is still very present as a widespread illness affecting mainly the young with mild disease

but also taking the lives of many, of all different ages. This visitor has not left, by the way. Influenzas rise and fall in waves and we've only seen two or three, with the last in mid-October. Please don't confuse a quiet period for absence. The H1N1 is most likely gathering strength to rise again. Please get vaccinated now while you can.

If one place does not have the vaccine, call around. It is now being shipped out in large quantities and many towns are able to drop the risk criteria, as they have had several clinics. Many will not even check for residency now that the supply is there. So, please, call around.

It's not that we are following different orders or that we are ignoring them, either. The information from CDC and DPH serves as guidance. It informs us. We use that information to the best of our ability and, knowing our own town, its needs, strengths and weaknesses, we decide at the local level when it is time to tailor the program, so that we can be as effective as possible.

Moving on into 2010, putting into practice what others theorized, Halifax and Plympton will offer at least one more H1N1 clinic at the Halifax Elementary School gymnasium on Saturday, January, 9 from 10:00 a.m to 1:00 p.m. This clinic is open to all over one year old who need the vaccination.

If vaccine is available for physicians and hospitals, maybe this will be our last H1N1 clinic. If that is the case, then I look forward to being a health agent for all and for all issues, once again, as in the past.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax, MA. Happy New Year to you! What do you think your health agent should practice, besides common sense? You can reach her at 781 293 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)*