

'No Olympic events will be cancelled'

Officials more concerned with effects on athletes than general population

BY JEFF LEE, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE AUGUST 30, 2009



Vancouver's chief medical health officer, Patricia Daly, flanked by Mayor Gregor Robertson, disagrees with closing schools or public assemblies because of the flu pandemic.

Photograph by: Ian Smith, Canwest News Service

Fears that the H1N1 virus will take a deadly swipe through the spectator stands or the athletes' village during the 2010 Olympic Games aren't likely to be realized.

More likely, the virus will be felt in smaller ways: the absence of an athlete here, a cluster of fevers and chills there, and a little paranoia among those with coughs and fevers.

For countries like Canada -- whose potential medallists are concentrated in a few sports -- swine flu could also have a disastrous effect on the standings if it sweeps through a team.

Podium Canada chief executive Roger Jackson made that point earlier this year when he noted the effect speed skater Cindy Klassen had on Canada's medal count -- third overall with 24 -- at the 2006 Olympics in Turin.

"People don't remember that one gal won five of our medals," he said of Klassen. "And if she'd had a cold during the Games, we'd have been sixth or seventh."

And if she'd had H1N1 and passed it along to Kristina Groves or Deny Morrison or other members of

the speed skating team, Canada could have ended the Games with 16 medals instead of 24.

Health professionals for months have been trying to ratchet down the fear people have about contracting and dying from swine flu. They've pointed out that the pathology of the pandemic is now showing itself to be -- for most people, at least -- a nasty but not particularly dangerous disease.

They point out that in Canada, an average of 6,000 people die annually from seasonal flu symptoms.

Medical officials overseeing the 2010 Winter Games say they're not taking the virus lightly, but they also don't believe it will be necessary or even wise to shut down the Games or close events to spectators in the event of a fresh outbreak.

"I think influenza is an infection that we should always respect. But the last time we had a flu pandemic, in 1968, there were two Olympic Games," said Dr. Reka Gustafson, the medical director of communicable disease control for the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority.

"It's important to remember that H1N1 is behaving like a seasonal influenza virus, albeit one for which a separate vaccine is being developed."

Still, that hasn't stopped other countries from reacting strongly, even to the point of cancelling sports events.

Last week, India's hockey federation postponed next month's national championships and other sports officials mulled cutting short shooting and table tennis camps. In June, the Trinidad and Tobago government cancelled the inaugural Caribbean Games, scheduled for July, as it wrestled with a growing number of flu infections.

And in China, visiting Canadians, Mexicans and Americans were summarily quarantined after arriving on flights with passengers who had the flu.

Recently, the British government mused about putting contingency plans in place as the flu pandemic escalates, including possibly banning crowds from sporting events such as the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games.

In Vancouver, health officials are taking a more measured approach.

Gustafson's boss, the health authority's chief medical officer Dr. Patricia Daly, said recently she disagrees with closing schools or public assemblies, even though the World Health Organization has declared the flu a pandemic.

"I can tell you right now there is not a lot of evidence they are of any benefit. We have no plans to do any of those things for H1N1. We will not be cancelling any of the Olympic events as a result of the pandemic," she said. "We just don't think the spectrum of illness warrants those kinds of Draconian measures."

Health officials are more inclined to study the potential effects of an H1N1 outbreak in Vancouver than they are to come up with plans to close borders, doors or events.

In May, the B.C. Environmental and Occupational Health Research Network sponsored a symposium for 90 institution-based scientists to discuss a dozen research projects they want to conduct around the 2010 Games, including the effect of H1N1 at mass events.

"I tell athletes that the Olympics is where the viruses of the world meet," said Dr. Bob McCormack, the chief medical officer for the Canadian Olympic Committee.

McCormack said the COC has regularly advised athletes to get vaccinations for seasonal flu, and expects to repeat the advice when the H1N1 vaccine is produced later this year.

Dr. Patrick Schamasch, the IOC's medical director, said his group is following the lead of the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and has adopted the recommendations of the World Health Organization.

"We are working on communications for the national Olympic committees and the Olympic family. We will not go further than the WHO recommendations, which are, for the moment, hand hygiene and no isolation. We will wait for potential vaccination," he said. "There will be no quarantine of athletes."

McCormack said the COC has developed a comprehensive strategy for dealing with H1N1 during the Vancouver Games, but he wanted to first share it with administrators and team officials at a meeting in Vancouver next month.

Much of that nuts-and-bolts strategy deals with how to lessen the chance of an infection sweeping through an entire team, and what to do when an athlete is suspected of contracting the H1N1 virus.

The spectre of a flu outbreak at the 2010 Olympics has, however, given organizers an unexpected marketing opportunity. Earlier this year, Vanoc signed two publicly-traded companies that each claim to have products that affect H1N1. One, Afexa Life Sciences, is the maker of a cold and flu remedy called COLD-fx.

The other, ALDA Pharmaceuticals, was named the official supplier of hand sanitizer and disinfectant cleaning products. Both companies will provide quantities of their products for distribution to athletes and officials.

ALDA claims independent tests have shown its signature T36 Antiseptic Hand Sanitizer will "completely kill the new H1N1 virus ... in 15 seconds or less."

Gustafson, however, said regular hand-washing with warm water and soap is just as effective as using alcohol-based hand sanitizers.

Hand-washing: the new Olympic sport in the age of H1N1.

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