H1N1 Flu Virus Not An Extremely Serious Condition, Most Doctors Say

Contributed by TNS
Tuesday, 23 June 2009
Last Updated Tuesday, 23 June 2009

Relatively few Canadian general practitioners (13%) consider the H1N1 swine flu virus to be an extremely serious condition.

Indeed, most doctors believe H1N1 is a significantly lesser threat to the general public than SARS, and that H1N1 is more closely aligned to avian/bird flu in terms of its severity.

By contrast, many Canadians equate H1N1 with SARS. Â
According to a study conducted by TNS Healthcare Canada, similar proportions of the general public consider H1N1 and SARS extremely serious conditions (34% vs. 40%).

â€œMost GPs consider this perspective to be inaccurate and they discern an overreaction to the presence of H1N1 in Canada,â€• said Paul Pacheco, vice president at TNS Healthcare Canada.

TNS conducted online surveys with 213 general practitioners and 1,021 adults across Canada and found that, in both groups, there is a pervasive feeling that the media paid excessive attention to H1N1. Â

The majority (66%) of GPs believe that the H1N1 situation was overblown by the media, and almost one-half (48%) of Canadians agree with this sentiment.

At the same time, many GPs (55%) feel that the public was conditioned to overreact to H1N1.
â€œParallels with the SARS crisis in terms of disease progression, media coverage, public health advisories and political responses likely helped fuel public anxiety in some quarters,â€• said Pacheco.

This view also sees expression in the conflicting opinions of the general public and doctors when it comes to dealing with flu-like symptoms. Â

Fully 38 per cent of Canadians would be more inclined to visit their doctor if they experienced even mild symptoms of the flu, whereas the large majority of GPs (83%) do not feel this would be necessary. Â

Evidently, GPs believe that the risk of contracting H1N1 is very low, and a sizeable proportion (45%) think that over-heated patient concerns with the condition may place an unnecessary burden on the health-care system. Â

The government and public authorities receive only spotty approval for their response to H1N1. Â
For instance, within the general public, 35 per cent express criticism of the government for having been too slow to issue an advisory about travel to Mexico. Â

Understandably, there is concern about preventing spread and keeping the disease contained, with most survey participants suggesting there should be more thorough screening practices at airports and border crossings (expressed by 51% of GPs and 58% of the general population).

â€œThere is also little conviction among either doctors or Canadians generally that public organizations would respond effectively if the H1N1 problem escalated,â€• said Pacheco. Â

Just under half (48%) of the Canadian public is confident that the government would provide all the needed antiviral vaccines in a timely and efficient manner if the H1N1 outbreak were to become pandemic.Â GPs are even more skeptical, with only 36 per cent expressing confidence in the governmentâ€™s ability to provide the necessary vaccines in a timely fashion to all who need them.

For the study, a national sample of Canadian adults was randomly selected from TNS Canadian Factsâ€™ Internet research panel and invited to complete an online survey. Â

In total, 1,021 consumers completed the questionnaire between April 30 and May 5, 2009.Â The survey data were then weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the Canadian population aged 18 years and older.

The online survey of 213 general practitioners was conducted between May 1 and May 11, 2009.Â GPs were randomly selected from TNS Healthcare Canadaâ€™s Physician Panel.Â The survey data were weighted to reflect the regional distribution of GPs in Canada.

TNS Healthcare Canada is a division of TNS Canadian Facts, one of Canadaâ€™s largest market, opinion and social research organizations.

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Toronto - May 2009