



October 22, 2009

To the BC Chamber of Commerce:

Re: Pandemic H1N1 flu virus and its effect on business

As anticipated this fall, we are seeing the expected increase in cases of the pandemic H1N1 flu virus. As the flu season builds, businesses – and particularly small businesses – may be increasingly vulnerable to employee absenteeism and the effect it can have on day-to-day operations. In fact, during the two- to three-week peak period of this second wave of illness, it's anticipated that businesses may see absenteeism rates of up to 20 per cent. On either side of the peak, absenteeism rates will be lower.

There are a number of steps you can take to prepare your business for the effects of a pandemic. Awareness is a key prevention measure. Remind your staff of common-sense precautions that guard against the spread of viruses, such as frequent hand-washing and coughing and sneezing etiquette.

Perhaps most importantly, your business should be prepared, where practical, to consider the opportunity of allowing your employees to stay home or work from home if they are sick. Concern about lost wages is one of the biggest reasons that sick people come into work and, thus, is one of the biggest challenges we face in trying to limit the spread and impact of this pandemic virus.

Employers should be encouraging their sick employees to stay home so as not to increase workplace absenteeism by enhancing spread of the virus through "presenteeism." It is equally important that employers be flexible and not require those employees ill with flu-like symptoms to provide a doctor's note as proof, giving your staff the peace of mind that they don't have to come into work sick. During this time of pandemic when physician resources are already being stretched, it is not only unnecessary for physicians to see patients with mild symptoms from a purely care perspective, but it also exposes other vulnerable individuals and medical staff to risk of infection. It is essential that employers, employees and health care providers continue to work together on this in order to help alleviate stress on businesses, people and resources.

While the situation is evolving and more cases are expected to be confirmed in the coming days and weeks, presently the severity of this pandemic H1N1 flu virus looks more and more like that of seasonal flu. It is anticipated that the majority of illness will be mild and that people will be able to manage and recover at home.

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As that is the case, wherever possible, employers should also establish or expand policies and tools that enable employees to work from home. For more tools to build a comprehensive disease-prevention plan to protect your business, please refer to the WorkSafeBC publication, *Controlling Exposure: Protecting Workers from Infectious Disease*, available at www.worksafebc.ca.

If managed well in the early stages, the likelihood of more widespread illness and increased absenteeism will be decreased significantly. I encourage all businesses to consider ways they can help control the transmission and impact of H1N1. Encouraging public wellness is in everyone's best interest.

For more information on the H1N1 flu virus, including additional resources for business, visit www.gov.bc.ca/h1n1.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P.R.W. Kendall', with a horizontal line underneath it.

P.R.W. Kendall
OBC, MBBS, MHSc, FRCPC
Provincial Health Officer