

# Critical Decision Making in a Crisis



## South Central Strategic Health Authority conducts major flu pandemic exercise

Flu pandemic, whether from avian or swine flu, remains a major public safety threat around the world, and public health organisations and other emergency responders need to be well prepared to cope with the many challenges such a pandemic would present. The South Central Strategic Health Authority in the UK conducted a major pandemic exercise - Delta II - in November 2008, from which valuable lessons were learned.

The Madejski Stadium in Reading, Berkshire, was the venue for the South Central Strategic Health Authority's large-scale flu pandemic exercise, Exercise Delta II. The culmination of months of work, the exercise brought together several hundred people from all the relevant constituent bodies within the authority - National Health Service Trusts, Primary Care Trusts, the Ambulance Trust - as well as supporting agencies.

According to Debbie Lewis, Emergency Planning Manager for South Central Strategic Health Authority, who organised the exercise: 'The objectives of the exercise were to test the plans and preparedness of South Central Strategic Health Authority's constituent organisations, to raise awareness among managers and other staff of the issues that would be likely to occur during a pandemic, and to learn lessons for improving the Authority's plans, procedures and capacity.'

'We wanted an exercise that would build over time, illustrating the key phases and the issues that would be likely to occur during those phases. We also wanted to explore such issues as the impact of an attack rate of 25% and a mortality rate of 2.5% on both the general population and our own staff, and the implications for long term resilience and a possible "second wave".'

The exercise players were grouped into four syndicate rooms, simulating the following command teams or groupings:

- South Central SHA Control Team
- South Central Ambulance Service Command Team
- Hampshire and Isle of Wight Influenza Pandemic Committee and individual trust command teams
- Thames Valley Influenza Pandemic Committee and individual trust command teams.

The day-long exercise simulated several of the different phases that are predicted to occur during a flu pandemic: First UK Case; Local outbreaks; Peak week; Recovery. Injects such as news media (television news and newspapers) and disease spread information were contained within the scenario pack provided by VectorCommand, with injects run through the Training and Exercising System. VectorCommand also provided exercise support and facilitation staff.

### Critical Issues

During the syndicate sessions a wide range of critical issues - from public communications, ambulance capacity, admissions criteria, A and E and hospital surge capacity - were raised and discussed. The lessons learned were recorded and incorporated into a detailed post-exercise report, which will serve as the basis for future planning and exercising.

Commenting on the exercise, Jim Easton, Chief Executive of South Central SHA said: 'Delta II provided an opportunity for all the health communities across South Central to test their pandemic plans together in a large scale, challenging and realistic exercise. It allowed us both to recognise the good preparations and plans that exist but, more importantly, to test those plans, identifying potential weaknesses which can now be rectified. It was a strong exercise, and for me personally, as the Chief Executive of the patch, was important and helpful.'

Professor John Newton, Director of Public Health for NHS South Central said: 'The support for this exercise clearly demonstrated the high level of commitment across the NHS in this region to preparing for pandemic flu. There was plenty of evidence that progress had been made, but also some useful pointers to where we needed to focus our attention in the next few weeks and months. Overall, this was a really useful exercise that brought home to the participants the level of challenge that we would be facing in a pandemic.'

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Top: Commuters wear facemasks in Mexico City in response to outbreak of swine flu, April 2009;

Centre: South Central SHA Control Centre Team;

Right: Ambulance Service Command Team, South Central SHA Pandemic exercise, November 2008.

