

Preparing for a pandemic

Disease protocol sets guidelines for university

By Heather Rule
Staff writer

With cases of avian influenza popping up from Asia to Western Europe, organizations in the United States have begun preparations for a possible pandemic. St. Thomas has created a communicable disease protocol, a plan that will go into effect if the avian flu reaches Minnesota.

"The University of St. Thomas is taking every step to ensure that we are prepared for a potential pandemic as well as other possible emergencies," said Madonna McDermott, director of student health services and the Wellness Center.

Avian flu, also known as "bird flu," typically affects birds, but one strain, H5N1, has been transmitted sporadically from birds to humans throughout Southeast Asia since 1997.

Bird flu so far has infected 169 people worldwide and killed 91, according to the World Health Organization. Humans have only been infected with the virus after prolonged contact with infected poultry. The virus has not yet spread from person to person.

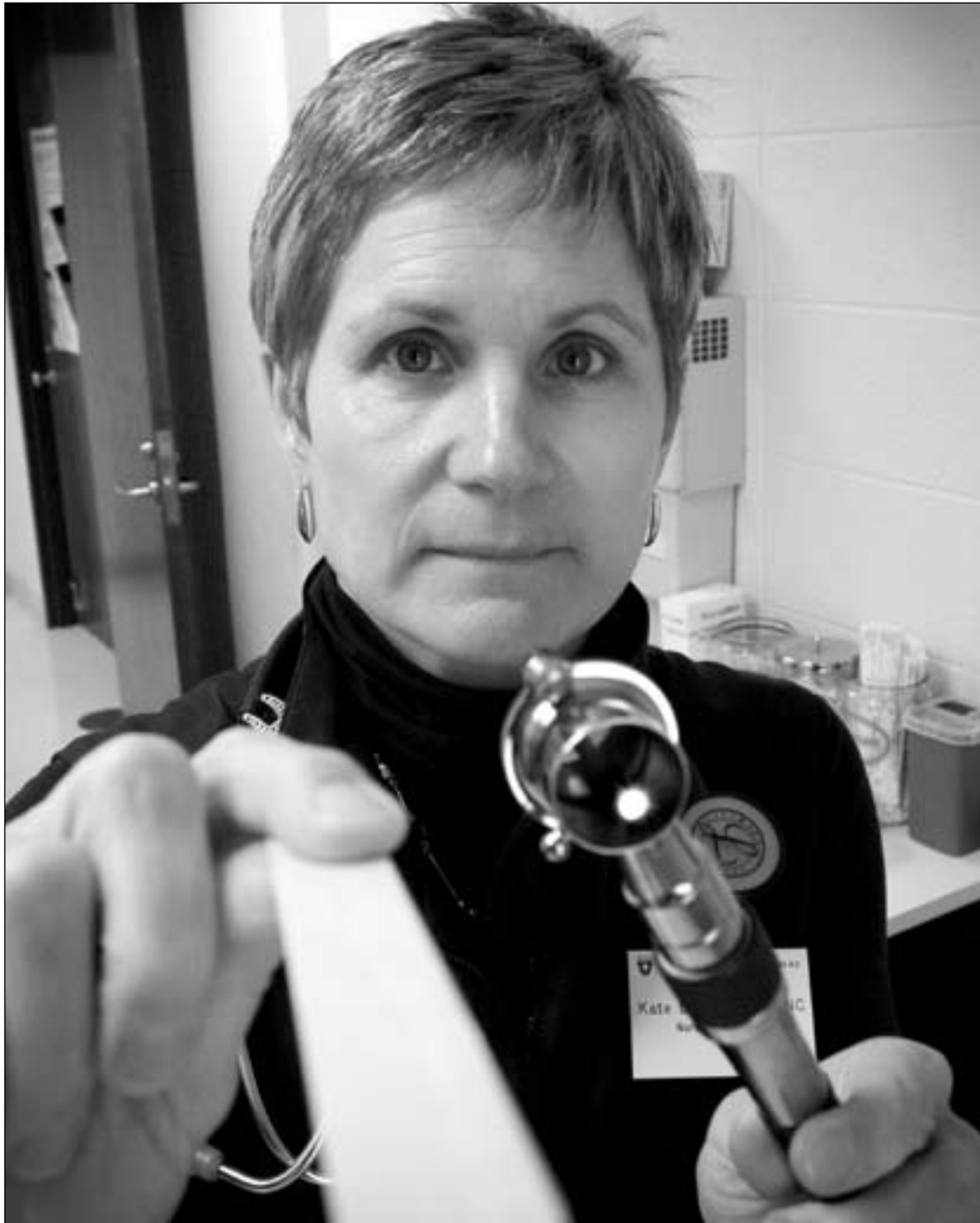
Because strains of bird flu typically do not infect humans, there is little or no immunity against them. A pandemic could result if the H5N1 virus spread from person to person.

A pandemic is defined as a global outbreak of disease. In the past 100 years, severe flu pandemics have occurred in 1918, 1957 and 1968. Many scientists and physicians believe it is only a matter of time before another pandemic occurs. Modeling studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that between 15 and 35 percent of the U.S. population could be affected by a pandemic.

Although cases of the H5N1 bird flu have not been found in North America, St. Thomas has begun preparations for the virus by creating a detailed plan that will help identify and control many communicable diseases, including strains of influenza like H5N1 and other diseases like tuberculosis.

"We are using pandemic emergency preparedness information from the United States Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control and the American College Health Association," McDermott said.

Some parts of the communicable disease protocol are already underway, including working with the St. Thomas Crisis Response Team, the state health department and local medical centers; a review of the crisis communications plan; stocking up on



JIMMY EAGLE/THE AQUIN

Kate Booth, a registered nurse at student health services, checks for symptoms of influenza. About 10 percent of the U.S. population will get the virus during flu season, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

personal protective equipment; and pinpointing possible isolation spots for people who become infected.

"The Crisis Response Team is a team of responders who are able to address a variety of crises and respond to people affected by crises in the university community," said Daniel Meuwissen, director of Public Safety and Parking Services.

Examples of crises on campus include unexpected deaths, serious accidents, controversial situations and physical or natural disasters.

"As with any emergency, the more prepared a country, state, business, school and family are, the better the outcome," McDermott said.

Common strains of influenza affect about 10 percent of the population each winter. Flu viruses can spread through respiratory droplets brought about by coughing and sneezing and usually spread from person to person.

St. Thomas students can take appropriate precautions to avoid catching any strain of influenza. Staying

home when you are ill, washing your hands and covering your mouth after coughing or sneezing are all things you can do to help keep yourself healthy.

Symptoms of the flu include high fever, muscle aches, nausea, headache, extreme fatigue and sore throat. To avoid catching the flu, McDermott said, get plenty of rest and drink enough fluids.

Heather Rule can be reached at hlrule@stthomas.edu

Spend a day at the Capitol

St. Thomas will hold a "Day at the Capitol" March 14 to meet with legislators about the importance of the Minnesota State Grant program.

St. Thomas students, faculty and staff will join forces with the College of St. Catherine and Gustavus Adolphus College for "Day at the Capitol," which will run from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Participants will receive a background briefing about the grant program, which last year provided \$3.6 million in need-based financial aid to 1,120 St. Thomas undergraduate students who are Minnesota residents, and is expected to provide a similar amount this year. The average grant is \$3,241. St. Thomas hopes to persuade the Legislature to reduce the "student share" for responsibility in paying for college by 1 percent. If enacted, the reduction would result in larger state grants.

Junior Amy Sturdevant attended the event her freshman year.

"I was invigorated by the opportunity to effect positive change for my and my fellow students' education financing," said Sturdevant, legislative affairs senator for the All College Council. "I have been able to attend St. Thomas solely because I receive a state grant, and I feel like every student who is struggling should be given the same aid."

Staff members from the Minnesota Private College Council and St. Thomas alumni who are legislators or work at the Capitol will conduct the briefing session. Participants then will meet with state senators and representatives from their home districts before meeting with a legislative leader or a representative from Gov. Tim Pawlenty's office.

"The State Grant program is an important component of our financial aid package and helps more than 20 percent of our undergraduate students afford a St. Thomas education," said Doug Hennes, vice president for university and government relations. "We hope students, and grant recipients in particular, will participate in 'Day at the Capitol', and we also encourage faculty and staff members to get involved."

People must sign up for "Day at the Capitol" by March 6 to allow the MPCC enough time to arrange meetings with legislators. To sign up, go to the council's Web site at www.mn-privatecolleges.org/capitol.

If you have any questions, call Hennes at 651-962-6402 or Sturdevant at 651-497-2891.

Program offers international students a cultural link

By Ifrah Jimale
Staff writer

International student services accomplished its ambitious goal for the year: It found a family for every international student through its new program, Friendship Family.

Friendship Family began last summer as a second branch under the CultureLink program. Friendship Family was designed to help international students adjust to a new school and environment.

Through the program, a family and an international student are paired according to preferences. The family picks up the student from the airport and plays host to them for one to four days. The family invites the student back for holidays and family events.

"I never would have thought about the little things that matter quite a bit such as who meet the international students at the airport, who helps

them move in to the residence hall," said Madonna McDermott, a Friendship Family participator and director of student health services and the Wellness Center.

The parents of international students worry about such things, but Friendship Family eases their worries, said Arina Negoda, an international student services intern.

Negoda, a second-year graduate student at St. Thomas and exchange student from Kazakhstan, participated in Friendship Family at the College of St. Catherine. Her family was happy that someone was going to meet her at the airport, she said.

"I got a letter from my friendship family," she said. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me."

There are 345 international students from 66 different countries at St. Thomas. Eighteen are exchange students and they all have host families through Friendship Family.

Before Friendship Family began, Communication Partners was a part of international student services. Forty international students are paired with 40 St. Thomas students through Communication Partners.

Communication Partners provides international students with a guide on campus. A student shows an international student around and answers questions. International student services emphasizes Friendship Family so international students can experience the lives of American families.

"Our office always tries to come up a way to improve the lives of international students," Negoda said.

Experiencing new things for the first time goes for both the student and the family.

"My favorite part of the experience was being able to share Christmas with a student from a culture that does not celebrate this holiday, and how much my daughters enjoy getting to know

someone from another country," said McDermott, who played host to a student from Japan.

Friendship Family offers international students an experience beyond academics. Judy Olson, who played host to a student from Germany and two from Australia, said, "It's fun to show them the Minneapolis/St. Paul area and see their reactions."

The Olsons and their international students have discovered that many things they have read about each other's governments and politics are not correct.

"Through dialogue we are able to dispel some of the myths we have of one another," Olson said.

International student services invites friendship families and their students to participate in various events, such as Homecoming, the international dinner and other events on campus. The duration of the program is a year, or a semester in some cases. International

student services holds a picnic at the end of the school year so families can say goodbye to the students.

Students have 60 days after school is over before they must return to their home country. Some leave for home immediately after school is done; others travel. This year they can stay with their host families. The program does not cost anything and any family in the Twin Cities can participate.

The goal for Friendship Family was achievable because families were excited and learned many things from the students in the program.

"We have learned a great deal of things about the areas of the world that the students came from," Olson said. "We have learned that people are pretty much the same no matter where they grew up. They just see things from a different perspective."

Ifrah Jimale can be reached at ijimale@stthomas.edu