

## Poor communication plagues swine-flu management

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BEIRUT: Problems with communication regarding the management of Lebanon's A(H1N1) influenza epidemic were highlighted by American University of Beirut (AUB) medical students Wednesday. The fourth-year students said that while the likes of the Health Ministry, the Lebanese Order of Physicians and the World Health Organization Eastern Mediterranean Regional Observatory (WHO EMRO) had been doing well to keep abreast of the changing situation in the country, their frequently issued directives were struggling to reach front-line health workers.

Student Akl Fahed, presenting the group's recent study, said: "We cannot say whether we are prepared or not, but we can say where the gaps are and obviously there are gaps; mainly in communication at the lower levels, the people who need to relay information to the people who need to know."

Since a group of 22 students vacationing in Spain became the first Lebanese victims of the virus on May 22, the country's swine-flu saga has unfolded rapidly. Just eight days later three domestic cases were confirmed. By August 18 the number of confirmed cases had reached 568 and the Health Ministry stopped counting, choosing to concentrate instead only on those hospitalized by the generally mild virus.

With the situation evolving so quickly, the ministry – in line with WHO directives – was in July forced to move from a position of treatment to one of support, with hospital assistance and testing only for those most at risk. "The pandemic had been found to be not as lethal as previously stated so the response was downgraded," Fahed said. This change of tactics, said Fahed, had been necessary to ensure that help was received by those who needed it most. Unfortunately this message does not seem to have reached the country's pharmacists who are providing the antiviral Tamiflu without prescription, or the provincial doctors who are still sending a great deal of low-priority suspected cases for testing.

Although the Lebanese Order of Physicians has said there is an ample supply of Tamiflu in the country, doctors are concerned that an over-use of the drug now may reduce its effectiveness when the pandemic peaks or if it re-emerges over the winter. "There are places where 90 percent of the people with the virus will not respond to Tamiflu. Here we don't know because we have no studies but there are no policies that will prevent this. There is an increasing demand for Tamiflu and no policy to [restrict access to the drug]," Fahed said.

This concern was echoed by Dr. Suha Kanj Sharara, head of division of infectious diseases at the AUB medical center. "If you over use [the antiviral medication] it will cause resistance and then when you need to use it on the cases that absolutely require it, the medicine might stop working which is why it is our policy to restrict its use," she said. Sharara said that the mild virus was similar to many other strains of influenza and had not caused any major fatalities.

“The two who died did so because they had major difficulties with their immune systems, not because of the virus itself,” she said. “Most of the cases we have seen have been back on their feet within around five days and none of them had to take the antiviral medications because the virus is very self limited. You really don’t need to take the antiviral medication unless you have a problem with your immune system.” Sharara said that although the communication system within the health infrastructure was not perfect, the Health Ministry’s efforts to issue new recommendations in line with the pandemic’s progress had been gladly received. “At AUB we’ve been receiving almost weekly updates from the Health Ministry and that’s been very helpful,” she said.

During his presentation Fahed said Lebanon’s “culture of intimacy” contributed to the rapid spread of the H1N1 virus but added that due to the number of highly qualified and experienced practitioners in the country’s many private medical centers, Lebanon was well positioned to deal with the pandemic. Fahed and his seven colleagues who had worked on the week-long research project recommended that public-health bodies invest in stronger awareness campaigns and better communication to health workers. Points included calling doctors or contacting them through SMS messages when new directives on the pandemic were released. They also suggested that stricter monitoring of the implementation of directives would help increase their efficacy. “There were gaps in the project that would be great to fill but the amount of information that they gathered was very good,” said Dr. Hiba Osman, the students’ professor who taught the group alongside Dr. Abla Sibar. “This is one of the best projects I’ve seen,” she told the students after their presentation.