

TARRANT

The **A**lberta **R**ecording and **R**ese**A**rch **N**e**T**work
Tracking Influenza in Alberta



NEWSLETTER November 2005

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Dear Colleagues,

We have been contacting existing sentinel offices to encourage regular weekly reporting. Instead of interrupting a sentinel physician from seeing your patients, talking to a nurse or a clinic manager, who actually fills in and sends the reports to us, seems to work better. Please provide us with a contact person in your practice if you haven't done so.

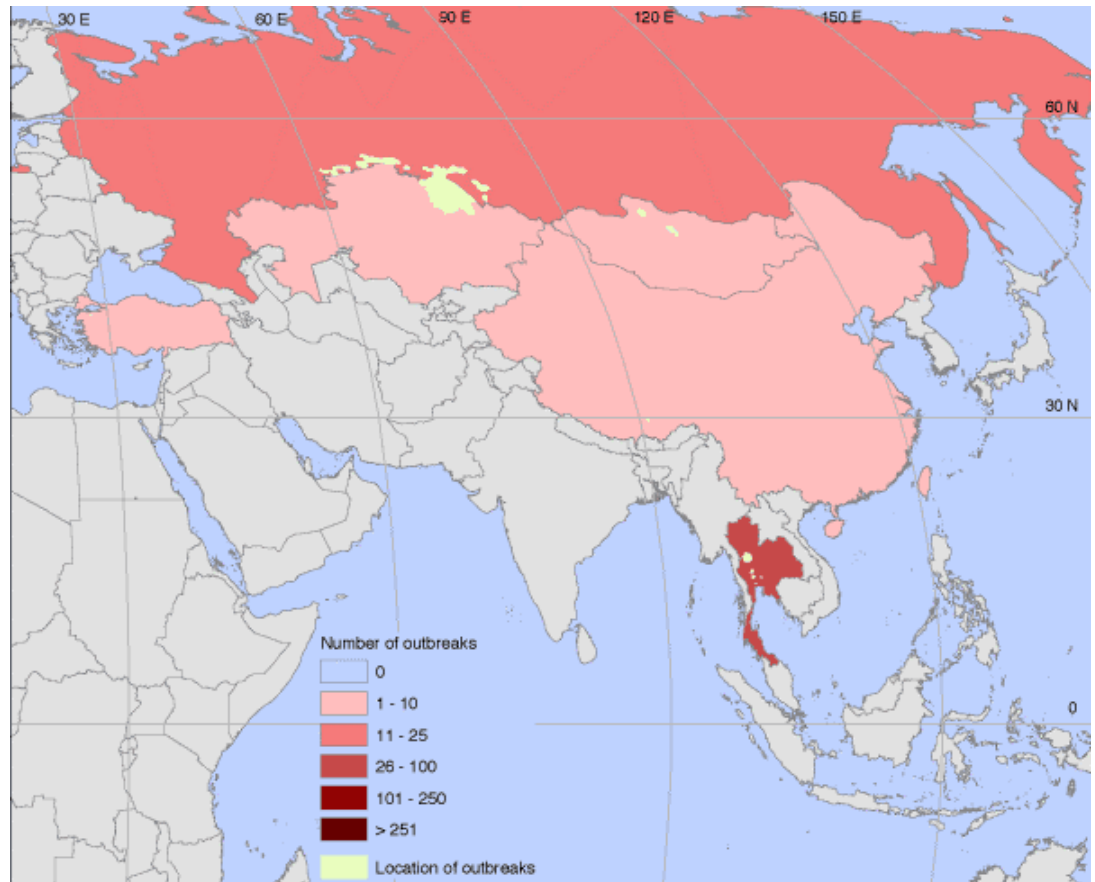
Influenza Activities Update

Things have been quiet so far in Alberta. No lab-confirmed influenza was reported in September and October. In Canada, influenza activity was reported in Saskatchewan and British Columbia in late September and October, while the rest of the country reported no activity.

Avian Influenza Update

The spread of H5N1 to poultry in Europe is of great concern as it increases chances of further human cases and a potential pandemic flu outbreak.

In October 2005, tests confirmed the presence of H5N1 avian influenza in samples taken from domestic birds in Turkey. Preliminary tests on birds in Romania indicated infection with avian influenza type A (H5), and results of further characterisation are expected shortly. Before the virus spread to Europe, many countries in Asia had been affected by H5N1 outbreaks in poultry.



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The map shows the latest version of avian flu outbreaks worldwide.
(Source: http://www.fao.org/aq/aqainfo/programmes/en/empres/Images/iul_oct1205-turkey.gif)

Up to October 17, 2005, the WHO level of pandemic alert remains unchanged at phase 3: a virus new to humans is causing infections, but does not spread easily from one person to another. However, the H5N1 strain has already met two of the three conditions leading to a pandemic: 1) a new influenza virus subtype for humans; 2) it has infected humans, causing serious illness and high death rate. The third condition required for a pandemic flu is its transferability from human-to-human. So far this is limited. The risk that H5N1 will acquire the ability to transfer easily from human to human will persist as long as opportunities for human infections exist. A recent published paper¹ demonstrated the genetic “reassortment” ability of influenza virus, which might potentially enable the virus to transfer from human-to-human efficiently. This paper is attached to the newsletter for your interest.

Flu Immunization

Your patients are probably coming in for flu shots by now, particularly with all the news about “avian flu” and “pandemic flu.” People at high risk of flu complications are the focus of the immunization program. *This year, NACI (National Advisory Committee on Immunization) statement on influenza vaccination for the 2005-2006 season has added a recommendation for influenza vaccination of **individuals with any condition that can compromise respiratory function or the handling of respiratory secretions or that can increase the risk of aspiration.*** Such conditions may include cognitive dysfunction, spinal cord injury, seizure disorder, and neuromuscular disorders. The new statement also emphasized immunization of health care workers for protection of their patients. So immunize all your staff, and encourage all nurses to get immunized. An electronic copy of the statement is available at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/ccdr-rmtc/05vol31/asc-dcc-6/index.html>.



Annual Meeting 2006

It's time to plan for the TARRANT annual meeting 2006! Last year some sentinels suggested we should hold the meeting during a weekend, so they wouldn't have to miss their clinic days. We need to know if most of you prefer a weekend. Please fill in the attached sheet and return it to us as soon as possible. Your suggestions on date (sometime in February or March, when the flu season is usually over), location (most likely it would be in Calgary again!), and topics are very welcome! You can even suggest which speakers you would like to have from your experience last year! It's your meeting and we want to address issues of interest or concern to you.

¹ Holmes EC, Ghedin E, Miller N, Taylor J, Bao Y, et al. (2005) Whole-genome analysis of human influenza A virus reveals multiple persistent lineages and reassortment among recent H3N2 viruses. *PLoS Biol* 3(9): e300. The PLoS (Public Library of Science) was formed in 2000 by scientists and physicians to make peer-reviewed research freely accessible online to the world (<http://www.plos.org/>). It keeps on growing, with public accessible journals including PLoS Biology, PLoS Computational Biology, PLoS Medicine, PLoS Pathogens, and PLoS Genetics. Recently there was a fascinating 2-page article by Richard Smith, previously editor of the *British Medical Journal*: Smith R. (2005) Medical Journals Are an Extension of the Marketing Arm of Pharmaceutical Companies. *PLoS Medicine* 2(5): e138.