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# Swine flu sidelines elective surgery

Adam Cresswell  
Health editor

ELECTIVE surgery is likely to be put on hold across the country as hospitals battle the rising toll of swine flu — which has claimed five more lives in NSW, including that of a nine-year-old boy.

The disease is now confirmed to have infected more than 11,000 people, with the real figure possibly more than 500,000.

As the number of patients being treated in intensive care units nationally for swine flu rose past 200, experts warned that hospitals "can't generate new respirators out of nothing" and non-essential operations would inevitably have to be put on hold to ensure severely ill patients were properly cared for.

Alan Hampson, chairman of the Australian Influenza Specialist Group and a former deputy director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Influenza in Melbourne, said deferral of elective surgery would be "pretty well standard practice throughout the country as we go into more severe outbreaks, which I think everyone expects to occur in the next few weeks".

obstetrics and gynaecology at the University of Sydney, said pregnant women should avoid any one they knew to have flu-like symptoms, while "going home in a packed train would be just the worst thing you can do".

"Second, report symptoms as early as you possibly can," Professor Trudinger said. "If you have a febrile illness and maybe a cough, you need to see your doctor that day — you will go on treatment."

However, he said most people infected with swine flu experienced a mild illness, and the people who required hospitalisation made up a small minority.

Why pregnant women were falling ill was not perfectly understood, but it was already known they were more susceptible to seasonal flu as well as more dangerous pandemic viruses.

Young adults and pregnant women were also hard hit by previous pandemics, in line with the theory that pregnant women's lowered immunity left them more open to infection.

"The flu season will be coming to an end, the vaccine is being

Some hospitals in Sydney have already cut back on elective operations amid an apparent worsening in the severity of the disease. The number of deaths from swine flu in NSW doubled yesterday from five to 10, amid alarm over a handful of severe cases of the disease affecting pregnant women.

The ages of the five latest victims ranged from nine to 71. NSW Health declined to release further details at the families' request.

Four pregnant women infected with swine flu are understood to be in intensive care units in Sydney, three of whom have given birth prematurely as a result of their infection.

While all are expected to recover, experts yesterday warned pregnant women that swine flu posed a particular threat to them, and urged them to reduce their exposure by avoiding crowded spaces and seeking immediate help if they began exhibiting flu-like symptoms.

Brian Trudinger, professor of

prepared ... we just have to keep on going until there's light at the end of the tunnel," Professor Trudinger said.

Nationally, the death toll stands at 29, although that is expected to rise significantly. The federal Health Department said that all the dead, with the possible exception of a man in his 20s from NSW whose death is being investigated by a coroner, had suffered other underlying health problems.

The latest spate of deaths came as research revealed that the vast majority of Australians did not believe they were likely to catch swine flu.

The polling by UMR Research has sparked concerns people are not taking enough precautions to prevent the spread of the disease.

Just one in five people is concerned about the virus, and even fewer — 13 per cent — believe they are likely to catch it, the poll found.

Additional reporting:  
Nicola Berkovic

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