

Countries plan swine flu vaccinations

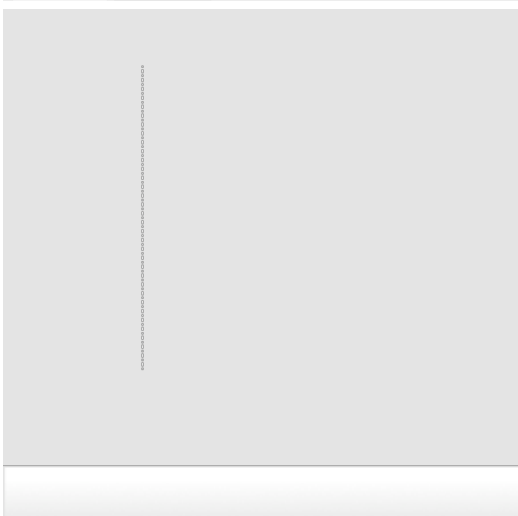


AAP

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Video

Image



The "unstoppable" swine flu pandemic on Tuesday raised fears of millions of cases by next year and countries talked about mass vaccinations, while South America sought a united front to combat the disease.

Italy predicted it may have dealt with between three and four million cases of swine flu by March 2010, the country's deputy health minister Ferruccio Fazio said Tuesday.

He added that by the end of this year some 8.6 million Italians would have been vaccinated against the A(H1N1) virus, with the most vulnerable and those working in the emergency services given priority.

His comments came a day after the World Health Organisation said all countries were going to need vaccines against the virus because the swine flu pandemic was now unstoppable.

Italy with a total of 224 infections so far has not reported any deaths. Elsewhere in Europe on Tuesday Croatia reported three new swine flu infections while Turkey said the number of swine flu cases has more than doubled in less than two weeks, reaching 95.

Talk of mass vaccination campaigns was reported around the globe with Germany saying it envisioned having to order some 25 million doses of a vaccine now under development to immunise nearly a third of its population.

Australia, the Asia-Pacific region's worst-hit country, was bracing to immunise the entire population against swine flu and has already placed an advance order for 21 million courses of a vaccine.

Federal chief medical officer Jim Bishop, expressing hope that the government could launch a nationwide immunisation drive by October, warned that the "hard-edged" virus was now infecting young and healthy people.

Six people younger than 40 who had otherwise been healthy remained on life support in Sydney after swine flu severely damaged their lungs, officials said.

Australia is already in the southern hemisphere winter, and officials fear the consequences if swine flu mutates into something deadlier in combination with the regular strain of influenza.

With the global death toll from A(H1N1) now reaching at least 429, WHO director of vaccine research Marie-Paul Kieny said Monday that a swine flu vaccine should be available as early as September.

At the same time, WHO chief Margaret Chan Tuesday warned that poverty will prevent some countries from gaining access to swine flu vaccines, as she criticised a bias in favour of richer nations.

"Manufacturing capacity for influenza vaccines is finite and woefully inadequate for a world of 6.8 billion people, nearly all of whom are susceptible to infection by this entirely new and highly contagious virus," she told delegates attending a World Intellectual Property Organisation conference in Geneva.

"The lion's share of these limited supplies will go to wealthy countries. Again we see the advantage of affluence. Again we see access denied by an inability to pay," she said.

In South America, health ministers from six countries will meet Wednesday to seek a coordinated response to fighting the epidemic,

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which Chilean President Michelle Bachelet has called "the worst in 50 years".

Argentina, which alone has reported at least 94 flu-related deaths, will host the meeting of ministers from Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay.

Elsewhere on the continent, now in its winter season, Ecuador reported Tuesday the disease has spread to 14 of the country's 24 provinces, with the total number of infections at 264 with three deaths.

And in Peru, some 15,000 doctors have called for a nationwide protest on Wednesday to demand better prevention against swine flu, which has claimed at least five lives and infected around 2,000 people so far in that country.

"We demand addressing adequately the needs of hospitals in order to prevent further mistakes in the treatment of swine flu and to avoid more deaths," Leoncio Diaz, president of the Peruvian Medical Federation (FMP), told AFP.

An infant boy died in a Madrid hospital due to a medical error after his mother died from swine flu. She was Spain's first fatality from the disease.

Morocco's king announced on Tuesday he will charter a plane to repatriate the remains as well as family members.

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