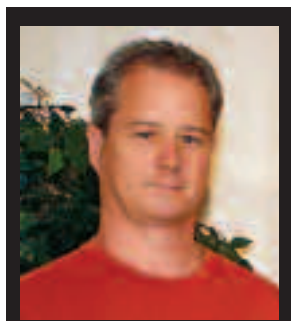


By Paul Atkinson, Chair, OPFEA Occupational Disease Committee

## COVERING YOURSELF FOR H1N1 AND WSIB BENEFITS



Paul Atkinson

**A**s you are undoubtedly aware, the World Health Organization is preparing for the potential of a flu pandemic. How much of this pandemic reality is and how much is media hype is unknown at this point. What we do know is that as front line responders, we will be one of the first exposed groups if this H1N1 pandemic does break out. Despite the latest and most up to date personal protective equipment, it remains a possibility

that the virus can make it past that protection and causes a person to become ill. The other scenario is for an unexpected exposure to occur such as a co-worker coming to work ill or becoming ill during the work day.

In the past, the likely result would be that after an exposure occurs, the member would book sick with the employer, not see a doctor, ride the flu out, return to work and then remember about treating an ill person upon that return. The next step is to try and reclaim the sick time back under WSIB but at this point it is unlikely that this will occur do to the lack of reporting and medical treatment.

A quick search reveals a few facts about the H1N1 flu, the incubation period can be from one to four days and as high as seven days. If you become ill you will likely be sick for a week or longer. Unlike SARS, there is not a mandatory isolation in place after exposure at this point so there is the potential to go to a medical response, be exposed to H1N1 and become ill after finishing a shift. However, do you really want to utilize sick time and potentially become involved in an attendance management program at a later date as a result of the work exposure to the virus.

As is recommended, if you become ill with flu like symptoms the health agencies are telling you to stay home in an effort to reduce the spread of the illness. Another known fact about the H1N1 indicates that once you become ill, you are infectious for approximately 24 hours.

The key point of this article is to advise our members on how to seek WSIB benefits in the event that an H1N1 flu illness is related to a work exposure.

To confirm entitlement, the WSIB looks for:

*A documented exposure at work*

*Is the exposure and illness development within accepted latency period?*

*Were there other exposures that are more significant in that period?*

*Is there a confirmed diagnosis of the illness?*

It is recommended that if you respond to a medical call that likely involves H1N1 that a supervisor's report of injury and a WSIB Form 6 are completed for everyone that attended the response even if all personal protective equipment is worn. Completing these forms do not require that you immediately go to the doctor or lay off work; it is exactly the same as completing the forms for a minor injury. By completing a supervisor's report of injury and a WSIB Form 6 you have simply documented an occurrence.



Let us now presume that at some point between the next one and four to seven days, you become ill with flu like symptoms. When this occurs, there is a high degree of probability that you will loose time from work. The previously completed paperwork now needs to be activated as soon as you become ill. Notify the employer by phone that you are claiming WSIB benefits for the exposure that occurred and that you are loosing time from work as a result.

In order to obtain WSIB benefits, it is required that you be under the care of a medical health professional. This means that you must go to the doctor without a significant delay. As you are infectious for 24 hours, that would not be an unreasonable period of time to wait before going to the walk-in clinic or family doctor. Depending on the severity of the pandemic and your home location, a doctors' visit may not occur for a week. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that no medical treatment equals no WSIB approval. The main reason that you want to see a doctor, beyond any health concerns that you may have, is that for this particular strain of flu there are tests can be performed to confirm the H1N1 flu diagnosis. Once diagnosed, the WSIB will be in a position to determine entitlement on the claim.

Hopefully the pandemic does not occur, but if it should remember to document all exposures with the appropriate paperwork, seek medical attention during the illness and notify the employer that you are seeking WSIB benefits. These actions will increase the chances of the claim being successful.

### Editor's Note:

Information is changing at a rapid pace as more is learned about the new H1N1 virus. However, at this time, for WSIB purposes, it continues to be advised that medical treatment is sought sooner rather than later.

Stay current with information regarding H1N1 as it develops.