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Maintaining Trust by Being Just

Flu season is just ahead, and, if you're like me you're thinking about getting a flu shot. But there's no guarantee one will be available. For example, during the 2004-2005 flu season, shots were hard to come by. This was due to the contamination of the vaccines produced by a major supplier. One headline at the time read, "Flu Shot Shortage Poses Public Health Disaster." That article listed some unethical behaviors during the shortage: flu shots were stolen from physicians' offices, some wholesalers tried to charge hospitals \$800 for shots that normally cost \$10; a few doctors vaccinated family, friends, and long-time patients, while people at risk of suffering severe consequences from the flu were forced to stand in long lines and some went without.

All this happened during a normal flu season. Image what could happen if we were in the midst of a major crisis like the flu pandemic of 1918. It has been estimated that 50 million people lost their lives in that pandemic. Montanans did not escape the virulent disease. On November 1st, 1918, Montana officials reported that more than 11,000 people had contracted the flu, and hundreds died that fall.

Seasonal or common flu is a serious health threat for some people, but most get over it in a week to ten days. However, every 30 years, or so, a particularly virulent strain of flu causes a deadly global outbreak, a pandemic. It's been nearly 40 years since the last pandemic. This is why health experts are carefully watching the bird flu as the next potential pandemic agent. Presently, the bird flu virus is not transmitted between humans. But experts are concerned that the virus might mutate and become capable of human to human transmission. One World Health Organization Official was quoted in the press recently as saying, "We at WHO believe that the world is now in the gravest possible danger of a pandemic."

While avoiding irrational responses based on unfounded fears, it's important for officials and the public to be prepared. If the United States is hit hard by pandemic flu, it would likely take months to identify the strain and produce a vaccine, and it's predicted that there would only be enough shots for about 1/2 of the population. Further, the surge in patients would overwhelm hospitals, creating additional shortages of things like ventilators.

Recently I was invited by Earl Hall, the Bio-Terrorism Project Coordinator at UM's School of Pharmacy, to participate on two panels at state-wide medical conventions

focusing on this issue. Part of Earl's job to get medical and public officials thinking about how to prepare for a pandemic event.

Given the unethical behaviors of some during the flu short shortage a couple years ago, it's critical to have a rationing plan in place. In case of shortages, the plan must answer: Who should move to the front of the line? Who goes rear? And, who might have to go without?

Public officials and medical professionals will face many ethical challenges during a pandemic. The most fundamental is to be faithful to the public's trust. There are both ethical and practical reasons for this. On the practical side, the cooperation of the public is necessary for these people to do their jobs. If trust is lost, so is cooperation. On the ethical side, people trust that officials and medical professionals will fulfill their duties in times of crisis.

In a pandemic, people are extremely vulnerable and have little choice but to trust medical experts and public officials. However, to maintain that trust certain expectations must be met. Officials and health care providers must be competent, ethical and prove to have the best interest of the trusting person in mind. But there will be real difficulties in maintaining trust when some patients are told that they can't have the best treatment, and that they must go to the back of the line. How can trust be maintained in such a situation?

Being fair is critical in times of crisis. So part of the answer of how to maintain the public's trust is to have a fair rationing plan in place prior to a pandemic. We all hope that future pandemics can be averted. But if one happens and public official don't have a plan to deal with shortages, they will be seen as incompetent and trust will be lost. If the plan is judged to be unfair, official will be seen as unethical, and again, trust will be lost. To be prepared for the ethical challenges of a pandemic, officials need to involve the public in a fair and open process of devising a consistent and just plan, one that is ethical, easily understood and widely communicated. Officials must be just to maintain the public's trust.