



An Australian Government Initiative

Being Prepared for an

INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

A KIT FOR **SMALL BUSINESSES**



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Produced by the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources.

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This document aims to assist Australian small businesses better prepare for a potential human influenza pandemic in Australia. It draws on a number of already published sources in Australia and overseas and is the result of industry and government consultation.

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The content of this document was prepared based on information available in May 2006 and new information may become available over time. Readers are advised to visit the Department of Health and Ageing website www.health.gov.au/pandemic and other relevant reference sources to ensure they have access to the most up to date information to remain well informed.

Businesses are also referred to the HB221:2004 Handbook Business Continuity Management jointly published by Standards Australia and Standards New Zealand (2nd Edition 2004 ISBN 0 7337 6250 6). A Business Continuity Guide for Australian Businesses available at www.industry.gov.au/pandemicbusinesscontinuity contains more detailed information to assist businesses prepare for a potential human influenza pandemic.

Foreword

Australian businesses have become very adept at managing crises. Over the last decade, terrorism, the SARS outbreak, and more recently, Cyclone Larry has demonstrated the effects that these types of crises can have on businesses.

These events have taught us that while it is impossible to predict the future, it is certainly possible to be prepared, and to have appropriate plans in place to minimise the impact and to expedite recovery.

Now scientists and health experts are warning us about a new threat—a human influenza pandemic.

Planning for a pandemic presents new challenges for Australian businesses, because a pandemic will not be like any disaster we have experienced in recent times.

A pandemic will arise rapidly, spread quickly and likely come in waves, each of which may last for months. Should this occur, many Australians would become very ill, and regrettably, some would die.

With these factors in mind, businesses will need to reassess their existing business strategies to include contingency plans to cope with such an event, or develop such strategies and plans for the first time.

In recognising this, the Australian Government has developed this kit to assist small businesses in their own pandemic planning. The kit and other tools such as the Handbook: Business Continuity Management, available from Standards Australia, would also assist small businesses undertake more general, but valuable business continuity planning.

We know that the actions of governments and businesses in preparation for a pandemic, and during a pandemic will have a major impact on Australia's ability to cope, as well as the ability of the economy to recover quickly.

It is up to businesses themselves to prepare and ensure they are in the best position to manage the effects of a pandemic should one eventuate. I would encourage all small businesses to be prepared in Australia, particularly those in vulnerable sectors like tourism and those delivering key services, to develop their own pandemic plan.

I know you will find this kit a useful planning tool.



Fran Bailey
Minister for Small Business and Tourism
June 2006

Every year thousands of Australians catch the flu, or influenza. The costs of the flu to small businesses each year are significant, even though most people recover quickly and only take a few days off work. What if a strain of flu developed that was so severe, up to 50 per cent of your staff could not come in to work for weeks, either because they were sick or they were looking after family members. Hard as it may be to believe, this is what might happen if a human influenza pandemic (an outbreak of a highly pathogenic influenza similar to bird flu) hits Australia.

The Australian Government has developed this booklet to help businesses understand what a pandemic is, the impact a pandemic might have on your business, and how important it is to have a business pandemic plan in place.

What is all the fuss about bird flu?

You might already know that scientists and health professionals are warning against a contagious virus currently affecting birds (such as chickens, geese and ducks) that is spreading across various countries overseas. There are also isolated cases of the virus spreading to humans which in some cases has been fatal. The strain involved in the current outbreak is called H5N1 and scientists and health professionals believe that there is potential for this influenza strain to mutate and cause a pandemic, although currently there is no evidence of efficient human to human transmission.

What is a pandemic?

A pandemic occurs when a new strain of influenza spreads around the globe, infecting many people at once. The reason it spreads quickly is that it is a new virus and people have no immunity. The World Health Organization suggests that this virus has the potential to infect 25–30 per cent of the world's population.

How will it affect my business?

The very nature of an influenza pandemic in Australia will be unlike any other modern disaster.

A pandemic may:

- arise rapidly and spread quickly;
- make people very ill and many will likely die;
- generate unprecedented levels of fear and panic;

- occur in several waves, each lasting for several months;
- require government, business and many community agencies to be involved in a whole-of-society response;
- result in health care services not being able to provide direct care in some cases; and
- result in very high staff absence rates for some periods during the pandemic.

In the event of a human influenza pandemic occurring overseas, but not yet reaching Australia, there could be substantial reduction in people entering Australia because of border control measures to delay the spread of the pandemic to Australia for as long as possible.

With these factors in mind, businesses will need to develop contingency plans to manage the impact of a potential pandemic on their business.

The actions of both governments and businesses in Australia in preparation for a pandemic and during a pandemic will have a major impact on Australia's economy and its ability to recover quickly.

What is the Government doing about a pandemic threat?

The Government is closely monitoring the situation overseas in conjunction with international agencies and health experts and assisting neighbouring countries to combat the threat of a pandemic. Australia is one of the most prepared countries in the world, but the Government is continually exploring further options that will assist preparations.

Since the emergence of avian influenza in Asia in 2003, the Australian Government has committed a total of \$599 million (including funding from the 2006 Budget) on avian influenza and pandemic preparedness measures. Comprehensive plans and tools are in place including a national stockpile of medicines to use during a pandemic, strong surveillance networks and increased laboratory capacity so that diseases can be identified quickly, and contractual arrangements with vaccine manufacturers to ensure Australia has access to a vaccine as soon as possible.

The *Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza*, released in May 2006 by the Department of Health and Ageing, outlines the Australian Government's health approach to managing an influenza pandemic in Australia. The main strategies are containment of the virus in the first instance and maintenance of critical infrastructure to support community services such as water, electricity and communications.

The management plan divides a pandemic into the six stages globally as detailed by the World Health Organization, and there are also six phases in Australia. Currently we have not yet reached Phase 1 in Australia, while overseas, Phase 3 has been reached. This means there have not been any effective human to human infections overseas and no cases reported in birds or humans in Australia. The situation is being monitored very closely.

Further work will be undertaken on possible border controls and restrictions and quarantine arrangements, if needed.

Visit www.health.gov.au/pandemic for more information.

National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic

The Australian Government, state and territory governments and the local government sector are all contributing to a National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic. This plan will bring governments together to develop nationally consistent measures to attempt to prevent pandemic influenza from entering Australia and to prevent human transmission of the virus. It will also identify a coordinated rapid response by all levels of government in the event of a human pandemic occurring. A pandemic influenza simulation exercise will take place in late 2006 to test elements of the National Action Plan.

How will I know what to do in an outbreak?

If an influenza pandemic strikes, health officials will issue information and warnings through the media, official websites and via the Department of Health and Ageing Communicable Disease Hotline 1800 004 599.

Strategies like 'social distancing' (i.e. limiting interaction among groups of people) will be encouraged. This means that people will be encouraged to stay at home and avoid public places where large numbers of people gather. Child care centres and schools might close temporarily as viruses spread rapidly among children in close contact with others.

Such possible closures and restrictions might have an impact on your business.

Business continuity means having contingency plans in place so that your business can function during times of disruption. These can include natural disasters, occurrences of human error, product recalls, terrorist threats or other threats. For small businesses, in particular, even the loss of an important supplier, or a few key customers may highlight the value of business continuity planning.

You might need to develop or revise your plans when you consider the implications of a pandemic. A pandemic will not be a short, sharp, localised disruption, like most disasters. It will be widespread and may last for several months. Current predictions suggest that between 30 and 50 per cent of the workforce might be unavailable at the peak of the pandemic, and there might be a second or third wave of absenteeism as more people become ill.

If you provide key services for the community or other businesses, it is important that you are able to continue to deliver these. Emergency management and overall national recovery will be greatly facilitated if such services are available without significant interruption, during a pandemic.

For businesses that do not provide key services, you might like to plan for how you could best cope if you were to scale down your operations or close during a pandemic (this is the worst case scenario for businesses and many businesses may continue to operate).

Developing a business continuity plan will help you to act quickly when a pandemic hits and should assist you to recover quickly as well.

Businesses may also benefit from viewing pandemic planning as an opportunity to review their overall business processes and look at opportunities to develop more robust business systems taking into account all types of disruptions they could face. By incorporating pandemic planning into your overall business continuity plan you may be able to improve your business processes.

Ten steps you can take to be better prepared for a pandemic

You might like to nominate a staff member or pandemic planning team who can do this preparation for your business.

1. Identify your business' core people and skills.

What are your business' core activities, who carries out the essential roles and what skills do they need? How might your business operations be impacted by a 30 to 50 per cent drop in staff at the peak of the pandemic?

2. Consider the effects of supply shortages on operations.

Are there any products or external suppliers that are essential to your business functions? What would you do if you couldn't access these products or people? Can items you need be stockpiled or sourced from another supplier?

3. Plan for staff absences.

Arrange for staff to learn other peoples' jobs, especially the important ones, so that there are a number of people who can back-fill the positions of those who are away. Establish work from home policies where possible. You might need to think about the appropriate security measures you will need or what infrastructure might be needed to make this happen.

4. Consider human resource issues.

Update your leave policies (e.g. sick leave, carers leave and other provisions) and advise staff about staying away from work if they are ill during a pandemic. Concern about lost wages might make it difficult for some to stay at home, even if they are sick. Staff might also need to stay home to care for family, particularly children.

5. Decide if your business will stay open or close in a pandemic.

Remember if you provide an essential service for community functioning, you should make every effort to stay open. Businesses that are considering temporary closure should examine their insurance policies (especially Loss of Profit Insurance) and consult with their insurers before making a decision to close during a pandemic.

If you are not a key service provider you will need to consider at what point you might close temporarily. If you do stay open your business planning might include consideration of employee risks and your duty of care as an employer. Will you need to rely more on online or phone services? Does your business have the necessary infrastructure to cope? You should also consider that there may be interruptions to services, like power, or telecommunications down-time.

6. Encourage good personal hygiene practice.

You don't need to wait for a pandemic to practice good hygiene that could reduce the spread of infection. Encourage good coughing/sneezing etiquette and ensure you have a good supply of hand washing products. Your business premises, especially hard surfaces, such as door knobs, sinks, railings, and counters, should be cleaned regularly. You should also ensure a well ventilated work area and check that your air conditioning is serviced regularly.

7. Understand social distancing measures.

In a pandemic, staff should be encouraged to minimise contact with others. This might include restrictions on congregating in staff rooms or shift change overs where one shift leaves before the new shift begins.

8. Communicate your plans to your staff and customers.

In the lead up to, and during, a pandemic your staff will likely be concerned about and preoccupied with the wellbeing of their families. Their commitment or ability to work may not be their major concern. Staff and customers will feel reassured by your pandemic planning activities and will be pleased to know you are thinking ahead, and are preparing as best you can. Tell your staff about your expectations of them during a pandemic (i.e. to report any illness and not to come to work if ill.)

9. Look at the financial implications.

Think about how a downturn in business might affect your business' cash flow. Do you have some cash reserves? Remember that credit facilities might be limited.

10. Test your plan and know when to use it.

Once you have developed your continuity plan, it is worthwhile to test your plan. This way you'll know how well it might work in a real situation and if you have overlooked anything. Decide when you will activate your plan.

Flu is caused by viruses that infect the nose, throat and lungs, and is generally spread from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes. No vaccine is currently available for pandemic influenza. Taking infection control measures is one of the best ways to minimise infection. These simple, common sense practices might help you and your employees reduce influenza infection.

Hand washing



- Adopt good hand washing/hand hygiene practices, particularly after coughing, sneezing or using tissues.
- Immediately dispose of used tissues.
- Keep hands away from the mucous membranes of the eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Ensure that adequate supplies of hand hygiene products are available. (This is a high planning priority as there may be interruption to the supply or shortages of soap and hand towels).
- Have a supply of tissues available and provide no-touch receptacles for used tissue disposal.
- Consider having conveniently located dispensers of alcohol-based hand rub.
- Provide soap and disposable towels for hand washing near sinks.

Coughing and sneezing



- Cover nose and mouth when sneezing and coughing (preferably with a disposable single use tissue).
- Dispose of tissues in the nearest waste receptacle after use. Do not store them in your pockets.
- Wash your hands after coughing or sneezing or touching used tissues.

Personal protective equipment



- The most commonly used equipment would be masks and protective barriers.
- Disposable surgical masks help prevent exposing others to respiratory secretions of those who are ill. Dispose of any mask as soon as it becomes moist or after any cough or sneeze, and wash your hands thoroughly.
- Protective barriers in the form of Perspex or glass may provide useful protection for people such as front counter staff, whose duties require them to have frequent face-to-face contact with members of the public and where social distancing is not practical.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

A range of resources is available for businesses to assist in developing continuity plans for a pandemic. The Government has produced a comprehensive planning guide titled *Being Prepared for a Human Influenza Pandemic—A Business Continuity Guide for Australian Businesses*. This document and other useful links can be found at the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources website www.industry.gov.au/pandemicbusinesscontinuity

The Department of Health and Ageing has a range of information and resources on pandemic influenza. Visit www.health.gov.au/pandemic



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