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Telephone: 0860 142 142

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Reference: H1N1 influenza

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4 August 2009

To all parents, educators and principals

Many of you have already seen the reports indicating that South Africa has had its first fatality of the current Novel Influenza A/H1N1 illness.

It has been confirmed by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases that a 22-year-old Stellenbosch University student has passed away after contracting the N1H1 virus.

I would like to send my deepest sympathies to the friends and family of the student. My thoughts are with them during this difficult time.

I am aware that many of you are understandably concerned about the wellbeing of our learners and your children in our province's schools. So far, there have been a number of reported cases in our schools. Many of these have yet to be medically confirmed, however, I can assure you that the Department of Education is on full alert and is addressing the situation in consultation with the Department of Health and all stakeholders.

It is important that we educate ourselves and our learners on the transmission of the virus, on typical signs and symptoms, and how the spread can be limited. In order to educate and prepare schools and parents adequately, pamphlets from the Department of Health were sent to all the schools in early July, however I have attached for your interest another, more detailed pamphlet, which is worth noting and distributing.

Schools and parents are advised not to regard this as an "outbreak" as has been reported. Should a medical practitioner or parent contact the school with a confirmed diagnosis of HINI for one of the learners/educators at the school, the following are the recommended steps that must be taken immediately by the school principal and school governing body:

- Contact must be made with the circuit team manager at the circuit office to report the confirmed diagnosis at the school.
- The circuit team manager must contact the Regional Health Services' Communicable Disease Unit.
- Principals must alert parents of the school notifying parents that there has been a confirmed diagnosis at the school. This can be done either by sms, email or by a newsletter.
- Parents are then required to monitor their children's health and we recommend that learners displaying "flu-like" symptoms stay at home as a precautionary measure. If they display the symptoms described in the pamphlet, it is recommended that the learners be taken to a medical practitioner or a health clinic for proper diagnosis.

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Contrary to some reports, the decision to close schools has not been taken. This decision is very controversial and will be a joint decision between the Department of Education and Department of Health.

Each cluster of confirmed influenza A (H1N1) at schools will have to be reviewed on its own merit. A principal can therefore not decide to close a school without the consent of the circuit team manager.

If members of the public require further information, they can call the Cape Gateway call centre on 0860 142 142.

The important thing is not to panic. If we work together, we can minimize the spread of the virus in our schools.

Kind Regards

Donald Grant  
MEC for Education