

Blog aims to educate public on preparing for possible pandemic

WASHINGTON – What do the founder of eBay, the U.S. secretary of Health and Human Services and a Mercy nun/ethicist have in common?

Pierre Omidyar, Michael O. Leavitt and Sister Patricia Talone, vice president for mission services at the Catholic Health Association, all believe that the public needs to become more engaged in discussions about and preparations for a possible pandemic flu.

You could call it a heads up, with a reminder to keep mouths covered when coughing or sneezing.

More than a dozen business, health care, faith-based and community leaders are participating in an HHS-sponsored five-week blog on preparedness for pandemic flu that runs through June 27. They and dozens of others also were to meet in Washington June 13 for a Pandemic Influenza Leadership Forum.

“The Catholic tradition with regard to the common good has a lot to say about this,” Sister Patricia told Catholic News Service in a June 6 telephone interview from St. Louis. “The church has a long history and tradition of caring for people (in pandemics and other health emergencies) even at risk to themselves.”

A blog, short for Web log, is an online commentary page, usually written in a somewhat stream-of-consciousness style. On the HHS flu blog, the 13 bloggers were asked to comment on a different topic each week and members of the public or fellow bloggers then responded or asked questions.

In one posting at blog.pandemicflu.gov, HHS Secretary Leavitt said it has been hard to convince the public to prepare for a pandemic flu that they think will never materialize. But “pandemics happen,” he added. “They have and will occur in every century. Our preparation needs to be for pandemics generally, not a virus-specific approach.”

Omidyar, founder and CEO of the online marketplace eBay, worries that Americans don't understand how little the federal or state governments might be able to do when a pandemic strikes.

"I don't think any government can be expected to step in and take care of every citizen if a large-scale, severe pandemic takes place," he wrote in his blog posting. "So the alternative is that we have to look to ourselves and each other to make it through as best we can. And the best way to do that is to learn as much as we can about pandemic influenza, and to think about how we might react should it occur."

Sister Patricia, who holds a doctorate in theological ethics from Marquette University in Milwaukee with a concentration in medical ethics, said a pandemic flu - which HHS defines as a "virulent human flu that causes a global outbreak, or pandemic, of serious illness" - turns on its head the way ethical decision-making is usually made by medical professionals.

In the triage model, medical care goes first to those who are sickest. "But with the pandemic flu, we know that people who are the very weakest are not going to make it," so care will go primarily to those who can be helped, she told CNS. "The American public is not prepared for that."

"The Catholic tradition is extremely communal and extremely self-sacrificing," said Sister Patricia. "But even in the Catholic community, this (new approach) will be a hard sell."

A native of Philadelphia and a church history buff, Sister Patricia remembers hearing from older family members and fellow Sisters of Mercy about experiences during the 1918 flu, which hit Philadelphia particularly hard.

"The poor were dying and people were not being cared for," so Sisters of Mercy were among those who went out to provide that care, she said. "They weren't nurses, but they risked their lives at that time."

Some unfortunate lessons can be taken from the recent case of the Atlanta man with drug-resistant tuberculosis whose travels to Europe led to an international health scare, Sister Patricia said. The man's approach seemed to be "if I have enough

money and influence, I'm fiercely independent and I'm going to take my own fate into my own hands," she said.

But if that attitude prevails when there is a global outbreak of influenza, it will have deadly ramifications.

Within the CHA there is growing interest in pandemic flu preparedness. A CHA-hosted audio-conference on "Thinking the Unthinkable: Ethical Preparedness for a Pandemic" got "a huge response," with 2,000 participants at 400 sites around the country, Sister Patricia said.

"Government alone can't prepare the nation for a pandemic," Leavitt said of the HHS effort. "This is a shared responsibility and the challenge requires leadership from those most trusted and respected in their communities."

On the blog, Sister Patricia said the keys to helping the public prepare will be "education, information and repetition."

"But while facts are important, we need to change hearts," she said. "We need to remember that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, that we are responsible not just for ourselves and our families but for the common good."