

STATEMENT OF MATTERS ON OFFICIAL RESPONSIBILITY

6. The Minister for Health and Social Services regarding the developing situation with swine flu

6.1 Deputy A.E. Pryke of Trinity: (Minister for Health and Social Services)

I am aware that Members are anxious about the developing situation with swine flu and I would like to give Members an update on Jersey's current position in relation to the outbreak, which appears to be of growing global concern. Last night the World Health Organisation raised its flu pandemic alert from phase 4 to phase 5, which means it considers a pandemic to be imminent and all countries need to activate their pandemic preparedness plans. Jersey's Health and Social Services Department have already set up a Health Task Force to assess all the international information as it emerges and to take action as necessary to protect the Island's health. Jersey's preparations for a flu pandemic, should one be announced, remain among the most extensive in the world. Yesterday we heard that 3 Islanders were being tested for the new swine influenza virus and treated with Tamiflu at home. The results of one of these 3 people had come back negative to Influenza A. Today there are 2 more suspected cases which are being tested. They are all suffering from a flu-like illness, having recently returned from areas which are judged possible sources of the new swine flu. Tests have been carried out on samples at a specialist London laboratory and the results, which will be announced when they are available, will show whether or not they have contacted the new H1N1 virus. The people affected have been advised not to mix with others and doctors have prescribed Tamiflu for all those who have had close contact with them during the relevant period. Having flu-like symptoms does not necessarily mean that a person is suffering from a new type of flu. However, Jersey doctors are following the national guidance and are testing anybody who falls ill after returning from Mexico or neighbouring countries. Jersey's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Rosemary Geller, is also advising children and healthcare workers returning to Jersey from Mexico or neighbouring U.S. (United States) states to stay off school or work for 48 hours after returning to Jersey. This new policy is now considered necessary, as more information about the scale of the outbreak in Mexico is becoming apparent. The fast-changing situation is being kept under close and constant review and Dr. Geller, who is meeting her health team daily, will be issuing regular statements as things develop. Our Emergency Planning Officer is arranging regular meetings of the Emergency Planning Board and tomorrow the Emergency Council will meet with detailed briefing and to prepare to take appropriate action, should the pandemic alert phase move from 5 to 6. Travel advice remains the same. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is advising against all but essential travel to Mexico.

6.1.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister have any fresh information on the numbers of deaths other than those in Mexico at present?

The Deputy of Trinity:

Only what was broadcast on the news this morning. I understand that there was one in Texas, if I remember rightly. But just to make a point here, that the situation is changing rapidly. As you see on the fifth paragraph down, when I first approved the first statement, that 3 Islanders were being tested, but good news, that one of those 3 from yesterday has proved negative and that is very ... so it is being updated regularly.

6.1.2 The Deputy of St. Mary:

Two questions on this: one is, does the Minister have firm data on the incubation period? Secondly, what on earth constitutes essential travel to Mexico in the light of this outbreak?

The Deputy of Trinity:

I think your first question was about incubation. I understand that the tests go to the laboratory and it can take up to 36 hours if necessary and the Foreign Office leave it up to the person to see what they think essential travel is. If necessary, there are helplines which have been set up at Cyril Le Marquand House and if anybody thinks that they have any queries is to contact them.

6.1.3 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Would the Minister agree with me, that, having moved now from level 4 to level 5, we are in a serious position, not only as an island community but as a global community: one stage away from the final level, level 6, where pandemic exists and is beyond control, in certain respects? Would the Minister agree with me that now is the time for us to set aside partisan politics remarks and disputes and to focus on working together for what will be a concerning time for the community in making sure we work for the community in being ready and prepared for any eventuality?

The Deputy of Trinity:

I fully endorse the Deputy's last comments and thank him for making that. I have every confidence in the team at Health and especially with the M.O.H. (Medical of Health), who is a direct link with the Health Protection Agency in the U.K. who in turn has direct links with the World Health Organisation. The matter is changing rapidly, we are being kept up to date and our links in with the Emergency Planning Board is important and also that meeting with the States Emergency Council tomorrow is important.

6.1.4 Deputy C.F. Labey of Grouville:

Have the 2 people with flu-like conditions currently being held in quarantine and have these suspected cases been reported to the World Health Organisation?

The Deputy of Trinity:

They are being treated at home with Tamiflu. I cannot give any details about if they have been reported to the W.H.O. (World Health Organisation) or not because there is a set procedure and I need to confirm this, I think. Once they are confirmed ... because at the moment those people are still on the suspected list and at the moment that is some very good news and one of them ... and I think we should be very thankful that one of them was proved negative.

6.1.5 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Can I just ask the Minister ... the Deputy of St. Mary, I believe, asked what was the incubation period of contacting and coming down with the flu, rather than, as I think she answered, which was how long does it take to get the results back to confirm whether it is this strain of flu or not. That is the first thing I have. Also, we need to err on caution here as well. Although it is possible that we are going to move up a stage, we do not need to panic. Most of the deaths so far seem to have been contained to Mexico. There are probably reasons for this.

The Bailiff:

Deputy, sorry to interrupt but this is not a debate. You must ask questions of the Minister.

Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Sorry. Does the Minister agree that the probable reasons are because in the other parts of the world where the illness has become apparent, have better health facilities, better family facilities and does the Minister agree with this and that we should not panic at this stage?

The Deputy of Trinity:

I thank the Deputy for her comments and yes, I think panic is the wrong thing to do. Everything possible is being monitored, regular updates, and that is the most important thing and that we do have an emergency planning scheme already in place and those Connétables who took part in

Operation Cold Play at the Radisson Hotel 2 or 3 months ago are well aware that if - and it is very much and if - it does go up a scale, which will come from the World Health Organisation, that plans are in place to help Islanders and to protect them. I am not sure of the actual incubation period as such but the M.O.H. has issued guidelines. If you feel ill 4 days after return from somewhere to contact your G.P. (General Practitioner). That is good advice. The M.O.H. will still be offering good advice regularly during the day and whatever days necessary in front of us.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Minister, if I may, one point of correction. The Minister said: "Contact your G.P." Arrange for a visit from your G.P. Do not go into the surgery and thereby spread any potential disease.

6.1.6 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Perhaps I could assist the Minister in that I understand that official notices say that the incubation period is, in fact, 24 hours.

The Bailiff:

This is a question?

Senator S.C. Ferguson:

I have got a question. My sister, the pharmacist, tells me. She has just got her package from the U.K. Government. As Deputy De Sousa has already said, the fatalities are either at present in Mexico or of Mexican nationals, including the one in Texas. Has the Minister received any information as to why this should be so?

The Deputy of Trinity:

Just to address her first points: I want to be really clear that there have been some messages about 48 hours or longer or shorter. I will make sure by the end of today that the correct information is given out, which I know the M.O.H. officer is doing. But I will make sure that it is sent out to all States Members so that we are absolutely clear, and that is the most important thing. Giving mixed messages does not help anybody.

6.1.7 Connétable S.A. Yates of St. Martin:

Could the Minister confirm, please, that the emergency plan for the pandemic would be passed to the emergency immunisation centres, i.e. the Parish Hall, which will be the interface with the general public of the Island, in the event that the risk level went up to maximum, which hopefully it will not? But at the present moment unless something has been delivered within the last 24 hours, the emergency centres, the Parish Halls, do not have details of the emergency plan. I would like to think that that would be sent with some urgency.

The Deputy of Trinity:

Just to confirm that we are on level 5, which means: "on the way, get ready", and that the Emergency Planning Board have met and there is the Emergencies Council meeting tomorrow. I know that the Connétables have a representative on that and very much welcome that. The plan will be set in place if it becomes necessary. I am sure that part of the plan will ... the Constables know about and the Parishes have an important part to play with that if it becomes necessary to go that stage.

The Bailiff:

That concludes the period set aside for questioning on a Minister's statement