

wellbeing

The pandemic panic

Logic seems to have flown out the window about the global response to swine flu, says Dr Paul Trotman.

SWINE FLU. It's a great name isn't it? Even a PR firm would be hard pressed to think up a better one. It immediately conjures images of people dropping in the streets within seconds of becoming infected or wallowing in self-pity as their lifeblood slowly ebbs.

But it's not been quite like that. Despite repeated warnings from the ministry of epidemics and increasingly hysterical press coverage,

actual evidence of people dropping where they stand or bodies being bulldozed into mass graves has been sorely lacking. Why?

It all comes down to the virus. Viruses mutate incredibly quickly to stay one step ahead of our immune systems. They are continually swapping and rearranging genes among themselves that control how they work, how they spread and how rapidly they kill. We use some of these genes to identify the virus type. The swine flu is an H1N1 influenza A virus. H1N1 means that it has version one of 16 possible H proteins and version one of

nine possible N proteins on its surface, the same as the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. The 1918 flu famously killed more people than World War I, wiping out 50-100 million people worldwide.

Normally, less severe mutations dominate as those with the virus are still up and about spreading contagion, but things were very different back in 1918.

For a start, there was a war on. The war meant more severe versions of the virus dominated; in a war, people who are just a bit sick stay where they are on the front line, and people who are sickest get evacuated and so promote the severe form of the disease. Of course, the current policy of isolating people with mild symptoms and sending the really sick people to hospital could be doing the same thing.

On June 11 the World Health Organisation helped us all get a bit more worked-up by officially declaring the outbreak a pandemic – a global epidemic – but if you read the fine print there's a disclaimer. It says the WHO's decision to raise the pandemic

alert level to phase six is a reflection of the spread of the virus, not the severity of illness caused by the virus. You'd almost expect it to finish like one of those health infomercials: "results may vary – your flu experience may differ from those shown".

In fact, according to the latest figures, the swine flu has infected 52,160 people and has killed 231, a mortality rate of roughly 0.5% or one death per 200 cases. If you take out Mexico it's about half that, close to everyday flu, which kills between 0.1% and 2% of cases, depending on who you ask.

So why are we being so over the top with our precautions? Closing schools, quarantining possible cases and offering everyone expensive Tamiflu (which actually only shortens your ill time by a day and, thanks to its rapid mutation rate, the virus will soon be resistant anyway). Well, it's that old 1918 flu again. In 1918 there was a second wave of infection that was deadlier than the first, killing many more people, and authorities worry it will happen again.

But here's where the logic goes a little pear-shaped. That second wave didn't infect people who had already been infected with the mild strain in the first wave: these people were immune because they'd already had it. It infected everyone else and killed quite a lot of them.

On top of that, new research suggests that these people weren't actually killed by the flu itself, but by bacterial pneumonia caught on top of it (remember in 1918 there were no antibiotics).

So my question is, why are we making such a fuss? Why don't we all go out and get ourselves infected with H1N1 now, while it's still mild and then go to work and share the virus with our friends?

■ Paul Trotman is a Dunedin doctor and *Sunday Star-Times* health columnist.

■ Dr Darren Hunt, Deputy Director of Public Health, has issued the following statement: "Swine flu parties are definitely not part of the Ministry of Health's public health advice. The idea of "swine flu parties" goes against the Ministry's efforts to contain the influenza A (H1N1) swine flu virus. If people deliberately

The Ministry of Health recommends the following:

- Be prepared. If you have flu symptoms, stay at home for seven days after your symptoms begin or until you have been symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer.
- Stop the spread of flu germs by:**
 - Covering coughs and sneezes.
 - Regularly washing your hands and dry thoroughly.
 - Avoiding contact with sick people and reducing time spent in crowds.
 - If your condition worsens, seek medical advice by phoning Healthline 0800 611 116 or your healthcare provider.

made themselves ill with this virus, this would have a huge impact on already-stretched health services. Deliberately infecting yourself with influenza A (H1N1) swine flu will put your health at risk. It is also hard to tell at this stage who will be worst affected by this virus."



Illustration: Pam Templeton