

Students duck 'n' cover in freaky avian flu exercise

BY SAMUEL DUNSIGER

This past Saturday, Ryerson students prepared for bio-apocalypse.

They were part of a small army of medical professionals from five universities and colleges who converged at Centennial College in Scarborough to simulate a flu pandemic.

"We're putting them on the front line in this exercise and to how they can cope," said Dr. Paul Arnold, an emergency physician who helped coordinate the event. "An important part is being able to handle the pressure."

About 200 students from Ryerson, Centennial, George Brown College, the Michener Institute and the University of Toronto participated in the fake pandemic, which spread through a virtual hospital at Centennial's science and technology centre.

About 100 of the participants acted as patients suffering from symptoms including fevers, vomiting and bleeding.

The rest of the student participants acted as physicians, nurses and other medical staff.

Dr. Laurie Mazurik, a physician from Sunnybrook Hospital who planned and led the operation, said the simulation responds to the province's failure to contain the SARS outbreak in 2003.

"We hadn't ever experienced anything like it and some of us didn't know how to practice infection control. SARS made us realize this," Mazurik said.

The immediate goal was to test the ability of medical and health-care students to step up during a large-scale epidemic.

"Students have a much needed role to play," said Gail Beagan, who supervised students participating in the experiment.

She said part of our failure to contain SARS was that medical and health-care students were allowed to leave hospitals and go home.

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— Renee Kenny, Dean of community and health studies at Centennial College

Participants were visibly overwhelmed during the simulation. Problems included a shortage of beds, too many patients, a shortage of ICU ventilators and an overcrowded morgue.

"I don't really know that much about medicine yet," said Steven Wong, a first-year medical student at U of T, who acted as a physician. "And there were so many patients, it got really hectic."

But Wong says it was a good experience to see what a medical crisis looks like.

It went something like this. After the initial outbreak, "patients" were subjected to a screening process by junior-level nursing students. If they weren't that sick, they were sent to the immunization clinic, where they were vaccinated by the senior students.

If they were very sick, they were sent to the "hospital" upstairs.

"The goal of this experiment was twofold," says Renee Kenny, the Dean of Centennial's Community and Health Studies. "It's important for students' learning and it's necessary for institutions to have their staff test their plans. There's nothing like a real exercise to test people's abilities."

The students were joined by about 75 staff from St. Michael's Hospital and about 50 professionals from other fields like pharmacy, social work and security.

The simulation is one of several conducted by the Network of Inter-Professional Disaster and Emergency Preparedness Action Studies (IDEAS) at Centennial College. Past simulation

exercises have included an oil spill and a hostage-taking scenario.

The experiment ended with a mock press conference delivered by Mazurik, in which she evaluated the success of the program. She said communication between members of different professions was weak, some participants had difficulty adapting to new roles, poor patient charting, and a general shortage of workers.

Official reports on the trial experiment will be released in about a month.

If you're caught in a flu pandemic ...

Since the SARS outbreak of 2003 Torontonians have been a little prickly about anything avian flu or flu-related. Here are some suggestions for when the awful bug makes it to your neighbourhood.

1. Invest in a bomb shelter. Seriously, if a bomb shelter can protect you from killer radiation, microscopic parasites can't possibly get in, right?
2. Stay away from pigeons, and pigeon poop especially. Actually, that's good advice for daily life.
3. Or, get a flu shot. You may think it'll make you sick anyway, but it's worth taking the chance.

