

Exercise to control pandemic

HUNTER New England Health will conduct next week the largest pandemic preparedness exercise ever undertaken in NSW.

The week long exercise begins on Monday and will test early recognition of pandemic flu symptoms and triage and infection control processes.

During the week mock cases will present to any emergency department across the Hunter New England Health region.

Hunter New England Health public health controller Dr David Durham said the exercise would test the service's ability to respond to a real pandemic, such as avian influenza, should a genuine outbreak ever occur in Australia.

Prepared for pandemic



EXERCISE: Clinical nurse specialist Liz Denyer dons protective gear yesterday.

By **TESS CAMPBELL**

DOZENS of Hunter residents have been placed in quarantine and the people they came into close contact with tested, following an influenza outbreak that has the area's health service on high alert.

While just an exercise, it is the reality this week for John Hunter Hospital emergency department staff, who are participating in a pandemic preparedness exercise.

Staff will be tested on their responsiveness to the poten-

Hospital tests staff response

tial threat of pandemic influenza, similar to bird flu.

The hospital's emergency department is among dozens in NSW taking part in a week-long pandemic preparedness exercise.

Patients would flood the emergency department some time this week, pretending to present symptoms of influenza, Hunter New England Health Service emergency manager Chris Kewley said.

"There is no case of alarm, we're just making sure we're prepared," Mr Kewley said.

It had been 40 years since the last pandemic influenza, but the Hunter's health service would be prepared, he said.

History has shown between three and four influenza pandemics every century, which

suggested Australia was due, he said.

"We're working on one of the highest levels of response," Mr Kewley said.

The exercise has a containment breach at Australia's borders.

Airports would have been on high alert, assessing international visitors for suspect cases, but an affected passenger had broken containment lines, Mr Kewley said.

"We now switch to dealing with it at a local level," he said.

Pandemic crisis test for hospitals

Clementine Cuneo

HOSPITAL emergency department responsiveness to the potential threat of pandemic influenza will be tried out this week, with predictions an outbreak may be imminent.

Hunter New England Health staff will undertake the week-long exercise.

Public health controller Dr David Durrheim said it is vital that health service staff are prepared for an outbreak, with studies showing it may only be a matter of time before a pandemic hits Australia.

"History tells us that there are between three and four influenza pandemics every century, and it has been 40 years since the last one, so we are living on borrowed time," Dr Durrheim said.

The exercise will assist the region's health staff, and in turn, state-wide area health services in preparing for any large scale outbreak, including natural disaster response and management of infectious diseases.

"It is an opportunity to put our processes, workforce surge capacity and disaster response plans into practice," he said.

The exercise is timely with the World Health Organisation warning that there is a substantial risk of an influenza pandemic within the next few years.

Health experts at WHO said an influenza pandemic is an epidemic of an influenza virus that spreads worldwide and infects a large proportion of the human population.

In contrast to the regular seasonal epidemics, these pandemics occur irregularly, but there is at least one every 20 years.

"The game-play pandemic situation we face this week will test our ability to recognise and appropriately assess presentations of pandemic influenza, as well as our potential response, communication and bio-preparedness as an area health service," Dr Durrheim said.

Throughout the week, Dr Durrheim said role-play type scenarios will be played out at all Hunter New England Health emergency departments across the region, as well as at support service facilities such as clinics.

Meanwhile, researchers are hoping to discover why the Hunter region has the highest rate of prostate cancer in NSW.

The Hunter Prostate Alliance will work with University of Newcastle researcher Professor Jim Denham to investigate the prevalence of the cancer in the area.

Alliance chairman Ron Bender said they were conducting one of the largest prostate cancer research projects in the country.

"What we're interested in is why do we have a 40 per cent higher death rate here in Newcastle than in Sydney?" Mr Bender said.

He said researchers will look at everything that is known about prostate cancer throughout the world and how the Hunter can bring about the best type of treatment to assist its patients.

Prostate cancer is a disease in which cancer develops in the prostate, a gland in the male reproductive system.

The Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia says close to 3000 men die from the disease each year, almost equal to the number of women who die from breast cancer annually.

Around 18,700 new cases are diagnosed in Australian every year.

Pandemic exercise

THE largest pandemic preparedness exercise ever undertaken in NSW commenced in emergency departments across the Hunter, New England and Lower Mid North Coast regions yesterday. The week-long exercise will test emergency department responsiveness to the potential threat of pandemic influenza in Australia.

Exercise to test health services

THE largest pandemic preparedness exercise ever undertaken in NSW commenced in emergency departments across the Hunter, New England and Lower Mid North Coast regions on Monday.

The week-long exercise was designed to test emergency department responsiveness to the potential threat of pandemic influenza in Australia.

Hunter New England Health units and teams tested as part of the exercise will include emergency department staff, population health staff, mental health teams, administrative and support staff.

Hunter New England Health public health controller Dr David Durrheim said the week-long exercise would help Hunter New England Health, and in turn, state-wide area health services, prepare for a potential pandemic in Australia.

The exercise will also have benefits for all health emergency preparedness, including natural disaster response and management of infectious diseases.

"The game-play pandemic situation we face this week will test our ability to recognise and appropriately assess presentations of pandemic influenza, as well as our potential response, communication and biopreparedness as an area health service," he said.

"History tells us that there are between three and four influenza pandemics every century, and it has been 40 years since the last one, so we are living on borrowed time.

"This is a very exciting, real-world opportunity for us to put our processes, workforce surge capacity and disaster response plans into practice," Dr Durrheim said.

All Hunter New England Health emergency departments across the Hunter New England Health area will be involved in the exercise.

Pandemic training

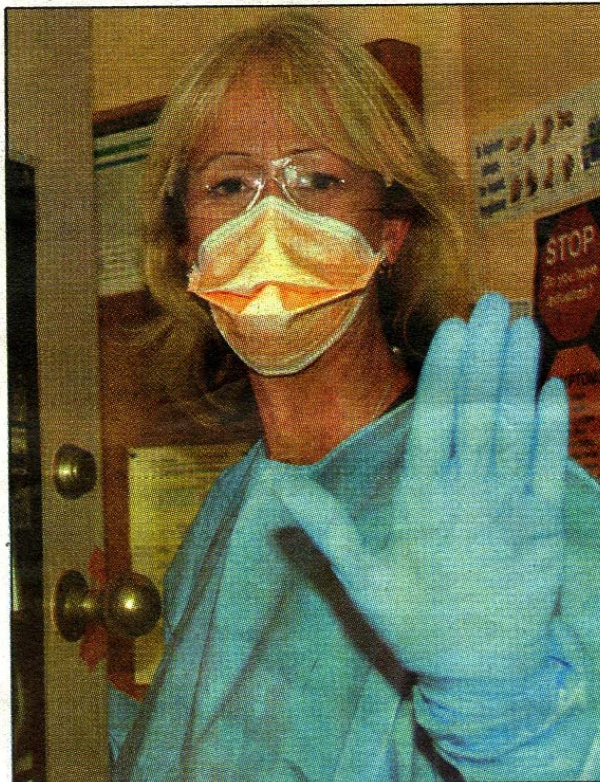
EXERCISE Forrest Gump took place at Singleton Hospital last week, with staff from the hospital taking part in a mock influenza pandemic.

The exercise, carried out in the Hunter, New England and Lower Mid North Coast regions, tested Singleton Hospital's emergency department and its responsiveness to the potential threat of a pandemic in Australia.

The exercise was designed to prepare staff in the event of an influenza pandemic with 126 patients at the Hospital screened as practice as well as patients from other wards.

Singleton Hospital acting health service manager, Ann Relf, said Exercise Forrest Gump had been carried out with great success.

"We had to exercise and process what we would do in a real pandemic situation," Mrs



MOCK EMERGENCY: Registered nurse Robyn Benbow taking part in the pandemic training at Singleton Hospital.

Relf said.

"The exercise was testing our ability to recognise and appropriately assess presentations of pandem-

ic influenza, as well as our potential response, communication and preparedness as an area health service to health emergen-

cies in general," Mrs Relf said.

Mrs Relf said staff assessed all patients at Singleton Hospital for influenza, as they would do in a real situation, and were able to identify patients if they had been to mythical places such as Gumpland, Jenesia or Chocolate where there was an influenza.

Mrs Relf said there was one fictional case carried out so staff could undertake the necessary precautions they would need to complete in a real situation of influenza.

"We had someone present here on Tuesday who had been to Jenesia and Gumpland, they met the case and we had to put the patient in isolation and notify the public health unit," she said.

"It all went really well, the Hospital was given a highly commended (by assessors) for the exercise."