

It's All in the Planning



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There aren't too many people around anymore who have a clear, firsthand recollection of the 1918 flu pandemic. Our knowledge of that global crisis is based almost solely on accounts that were written years ago. We certainly trust the stories about that difficult time, and we don't question the startling statistics that say more than 20 million people around the world died. However, the intervening decades between then and now have created such a divide that the whole event seems unreal.

It's easy for us in the United States to convince ourselves that a repeat of the 1918 pandemic couldn't happen now, not with all the technological and pharmaceutical advances we've experienced during the past century. And even if we do concede that another major outbreak is possible, probable even, there are enough current challenges in our hospitals and systems needing full attention that *possible* events tend to get pushed to the bottom of our to-do lists.

But what if the H5N1 "bird flu" virus were to really take off and begin spreading rapidly like many say it will? There's little doubt we're better prepared now than 90 years ago. A whole industry has built up around our need to prepare for pandemics and disasters. Government agencies, community organizations and corporations exist with the singular task of preparing for the unthinkable. The question, however, remains: Are we ready?

The special section articles in this issue of *Health Progress* are devoted to advancing our level of readiness. Catholic health care providers must count themselves among the integral responders to pandemics and disasters in their communities. Our role, as Sr. Patricia Talone says on page 42, is to "reach out collaboratively, inclusively, practically and pastorally" in the face of large-scale catastrophe. And our ability to do this effectively will reveal how well we prepared.

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