

Firefighters suit up for H1N1



View Royal firefighter Lieut. Heath Bevan dons medical equipment now standard to calls for possible H1N1 patients. West Shore fire departments are reviewing policy and enacting new procedures to protect firefighters and the public from the spread of illness.

Amy Dove/News staff

Keeping a community safe can be as much about stopping the spread of illness as it is fighting fires.

In the face of a potential H1N1 flu outbreak, West Shore fire departments are changing the way they attend medical aid calls. If flu-like symptoms are suspected, firefighters now don masks and protective gear, and disinfect equipment when they return to the firehall.

"H1N1 has provided a heightened awareness of droplet-spread disease," said Langford Fire Rescue Lieut. Steve Adams. "What we have done is reviewed and updated any policies we had prior to this outbreak."

"We have just broadened our idea of possible symptoms," said Metchosin fire Chief Stephanie Dunlop.

Metchosin, Langford and View Royal firefighters have attended to confirmed and potential H1N1 patients, but the flu isn't the only illness they encounter. "We deal with highly infectious patients," said View Royal fire Chief Paul Hurst. "Everything from hepatitis C to HIV/AIDS to H1N1."

Firefighters are often first responders to medical aid calls. Fire departments have equipment, such as oxygen and defibrillators, that aren't always available where the patients are, Hurst said.

Protection starts in the fire hall with proper hand-washing and access to hand sanitizer. "It seems like it was something we may have learned a long time ago, but hand-washing is key," Adams said.

Thanks to information collected by emergency dispatch, firefighters often have a good idea of what they are dealing with before they even get there.

"If we are not sure we error on the side of safety and we treat them as if they were infected with the H1N1 virus," said Colwood Fire Rescue deputy fire Chief Kerry Smith.

For those calls, firefighters wear gowns, masks, rubber gloves and protective eye-wear.

"It's not your typical dust mask," Adams said. "Our firefighters would be fit tested so we can confirm that it actually fits their face."

Those measures allow the crew to help patients without exposing themselves, Adams said. The procedure is used for any medical aid call involving droplet-spread illnesses, such as flu and TB.

"We are using the same equipment and procedures that (BC Ambulance) uses," Adams said. "And we have limited the number of people that would enter a residence with a possible H1N1 outbreak."

Where normally they might send four firefighters into a call, in such cases two may go in first to assess the situation, Hurst said. Paramedics are often on scene quickly after the fire department is, Dunlop said. "So we are able to clear and limit our exposure to the virus," she added.

After a call, firefighters decontaminate themselves before returning to the stations. All of the equipment they wear is disposable, Adams said, and can be thrown out immediately after use.

"There is a protocol for washing and disinfecting themselves and equipment," Hurst said. "This is new to this year."

In View Royal, the fire department's pandemic plan includes the Town. The intent is to help staff recognize the symptoms, know when to stay home and ensure the town hall has proper cleaning supplies, Hurst said.

"An outbreak of the flu in a small town, from a business perspective, can be devastating."

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