



**27 April 2009 - Press Conference at 17.00hrs.  
Gregory Hartl - Spokesperson at WHO**

**Gregory Hartl:** Quick update today, swine flu developments and what WHO is doing

We now have 40 reported cases in the USA and 26 in Mexico, there are cases in Canada and we have a verified case in Spain.

We have seen the disease spread geographically, and because of this spread and because of the increasing number of cases, the second meeting of the Emergency Committee which had originally expected to convene tomorrow, has been brought forward to today. That Emergency Committee meeting is meeting at this moment, it started approximately an hour ago and as soon as possible after the end of that meeting, we don't know exactly when it will end, but after the end of that meeting we will let you know in a second meeting such as the one I am holding with you now what the outcome of that meeting was. It will likely be Dr Keiji Fukuda who gives the subsequent update.

I am just here to let you know that today and on subsequent days, at this time, 17.00hrs Geneva time, we will be here for you and if you have any questions now to tide you over until the end of the Emergency Committee meeting, please go ahead.

**Journalist:** The Emergency Committee will obviously be meeting about or deciding about whether to raise the pandemic alert level, is it conceivable that it might go from 3 to 5 today.

**Gregory Hartl:** There are two considerations on the table, we don't know exactly will happen, and we would not want to prejudge or pre-empt the discussions in the Committee. If you look at it, the disease is spread as we know, we have confirmed cases in four countries now plus rumours of cases in other countries, so it is beyond one specific foci which is the normal definition of phase four, but there are other considerations to the effect of the fact that we don't know for example how much human to human transmission in communities in these other locations. It might still be the case that all these cases are imported cases. There will be judgements made because of that as to whether Phase 4 or Phase 5 is more appropriate.

**Journalist:** CDC has been saying since Friday that they do not believe that containment is possible. My sense dealing with WHO since then was that there was a bit of a surprise that the Americans would have said that right out of the box. And WHO has not renounced yet the notion of trying to contain this outbreak. Are these discussions likely to lead to a conclusion on that subject as well.

**Gregory Hartl:** I wouldn't want to pre-empt what they decide, but given the geographic spread of the disease, being able to mount an effective containment effort would probably not be feasible. Again unless it is found that most of the cases emanate from a

single area, and that the cases we are seeing in other countries are for the majority imported cases because of travel for example to that original given area.

**Journalist:** you have a GOARN team in Mexico and everyone has been very keen to get a sense of what is actually happening there, what is the epidemiology, the disease, are there a large number of mild cases that just aren't coming to the attention of authorities. Is that picture becoming any clearer, have they been there long enough to help to sort out a bit?

**Gregory Hartl:** They haven't been there long enough to have a complete picture, but certainly that is one of the questions we are looking at. As we have known since the beginning, this event, one of the pieces of the puzzle which is perplexing is the fact that in the US and Canada we are seeing only mild cases whereas in Mexico there have been a few instances of such severe cases that it has caused death. We don't consequently believe we probably have yet a full picture of the breath of illness that this disease is causing. This is obviously one of the things that the GOARN team is looking in to. As I understand it the GOARN team is currently looking at three different locations in Mexico. So hopefully soon we shall have some answers. The Emergency Committee deliberations are confidential and private but certainly what they might be getting today already from the Mexican representatives on that Committee, is feedback into some of these investigations.

**Journalist ABC News:** The deaths in Mexico, there were three that were directly related to this variant of H1N1 virus and I am just curious, there are reports of as many as 103 people dead in Mexico from what they are saying is the 'flu. Are all those still questionably possibly this particular variant? Have some of them been ruled out? Or are they from some other respiratory illness, can you give us a bit more on that.

**Gregory Hartl:** I do not have the first hand knowledge to be able to comment authoritatively on that. I think that there are certainly the case definition that they are using to pick up cases and I think quite rightly in the early stages of a new disease casting the net very widely, so they are looking at influenza like illness, they are looking at acute febrile illness, they are looking at pneumonia events, so consequently there are a lot of thing being picked up. How many of these will actually result in a confirmed cases is very much still up in the air, because as we know at the last count there are 26 lab-confirmed cases in Mexico. That is far, far under the high numbers that have been thrown out.

**Journalist from Associated Press:** You said earlier that the Committee would be discussing whether Phase 4 or 5 was more appropriate. Now does seem to indicate that you will be raising it beyond Phase 3. Did I understand that correctly? Will a phase change definitely happen and it just a question of how high it will be.

**Gregory Hartl:** I can't prejudge the work of the Committee so I would not want to say anything definitely because we don't know the outcome of the Committee, but the fact that we have called the Committee a day early would certainly seem to indicate that we believe that this an event and an evolving situation which needs to be addressed urgently.

**Journalist Reuters:** Could you tell us whether virus samples are now being sent to pharmaceutical companies. Could you also tell us the last time the pandemic threat level was increased? Also could you tell us if someone will be present physically at the UN briefing tomorrow morning?

**Gregory Hartl:** We understand that US CDC for example has already taken wild virus and has produced a vaccine virus strain and is currently growing this strain, the virus in eggs which is the first stage in a vaccine production process, and we have seen the media reports like you that some vaccine manufacturing companies are already preparing to produce a vaccine against this strain H1N1 so we certainly know that the work has begun to produce a vaccine. Remember that a vaccine because of current production, the current methods, it takes quite a while to happen. Basically you have to grow virus in eggs first. So from start to finish of producing a vaccine, a virus vaccine, until getting a vaccine on the shelves for use by people is probably five to six months.

Fadela Chaib or I will be at the Palais tomorrow.

The current pandemic phases were first introduced in 2005 when we revised our pandemic guidance at the beginning of the avian influenza alert. It was at that stage, pandemic Phase 3, because as we have seen with avian influenza still it is a virus which is very predominately in birds in various types and very occasionally jumps to human beings. So that is Phase 3 and we have never been at any phase higher than Phase 3 under the current system of pandemic phases.

**Journalist, Time Magazine:** Does the WHO have any comment on the EU Health Commissioner urging Europeans to avoid travelling to the US or Mexico if it is not essential. This virus seems to be passing across borders, passing across countries, and we have CDC saying that containment doesn't seem to be possible at this point. Is there any value to those kind of warnings?

**Gregory Hartl:** Certainly WHO does not recommend any travel restrictions and we need to be very clear on that.

**Journalist Washington Post:** You did say there are now 40 confirmed cases in US? Have there been any deaths? Did you have any new numbers on top of this?

**Gregory Hartl:** 40 confirmed cases in the US as I remember, 26 in Mexico and 6 in Canada and 1 in Spain. These are the latest numbers I have. Certainly the cases in the US, Canada and Spain have all been mild cases. There was one brief hospitalization in

the US in the earlier set of cases, in Texas, in California, but that person soon left hospital and is well on the way to recovery now. The only severe cases we have seen are in Mexico and that certainly again is a big part of the puzzle, why we have teams, Global Outbreak Alert and Response network going currently has teams on the ground trying to understand better the patterns of infection and the source of infection. And even if there might be co-infection and why certain groups of people have been so susceptible to this virus in Mexico, much more so, or much more badly affected by this virus in Mexico than in other places.

**Journalist:** In terms of the pandemic alert level, could you talk about what happens as a result of raising it to Level 4 or Level 5. Are there any specific actions that will follow from that.

**Gregory Hartl:** In pandemic alert level 4 - 4 is basically when human to human transmission, or sustained human to human transmission is limited to one relatively contained geographic area and it is felt that there is a possibility of a containment effort being successful, i.e. that we would send it very large teams to ring fences or seal off that area, or blanket that area with antivirals, and also maybe vaccine to people who have not been infected yet if we had the vaccine, but obviously we don't have a vaccine for a novel strain. In order to try to reduce the viral load in the majority of the people in that area and then consequently reduce slowdown and very extreme situations even stop the spread of this virus. So that is pandemic level 4, and basically as you can understand it is more of a very punctual concentrated local effort. And that is normally undertaken when there is only sustained human to human transmission in one given area.

So the question is in pandemic level 5, that would mean that we are seeing various foci of community transmission over several generations in geographically different places. If we make the determination, or if the determination is made now or in the coming days that there is sustained community level transmission, then that means that the virus is much more widespread and in that case there would be decisions needed to be made on switching over vaccine production from seasonal vaccine to a pandemic vaccine. There would be other decisions needed on stocks of antivirals, on what to do with antivirals, on health system provision because you can expect that if there are large, large numbers of cases then maybe health systems will be over run so you would have to start triaging cases and ensuring that you deal with different types of cases differently.

Pandemic Phase 6 which the highest phase basically means that it is spread across continents.

**Journalist:** Given the description that you have just put out, it would seem that we have spread across continents, although there hasn't been community level transmission. Would it not have been expedient for the WHO to have perhaps stepped up some of its warnings or some of its actions given what we have now.

**Gregory Hartl:** I am not sure what WHO could have done that it hasn't already done. I think the extent of this event only became clear to the world in the course of the past week and already on the night from Thursday (23 April) to Friday (24 April) we went into an emergency 24 hour operations mode here at WHO and on Friday began to launch the mechanism which resulted in the calling of the first Emergency Committee meeting on Saturday. We have done everything we can especially as we said yesterday, the day before, in the course of the past week, there are still a lot of questions which need to be answered about the transmission of the virus in Mexico. We all know that the biggest reported or suspected number of cases are from that country, but we still know that there are only 26 confirmed cases now. So out of the thousands or so cases which people have been banding about in public fora, really the number of cases we are sure of is much much smaller. So before we change phases it would have been irresponsible of us not to understand the nature of the outbreak better before we changed phases. When the Emergency Committee first met on Saturday, that was one of the big conclusions out of that meeting, certainly this looked like an event which could develop into something much bigger and as Dr Chan said, this was a virus that had pandemic potential and because it had pandemic potential, we are looking at a rapidly evolving situation. Expert Committee agreed that this should be classified as an international health emergency, but still the Expert Committee also agreed that we need more epidemiological information and that is why we did change phases then, we shall see what happens today.

**Journalist, German Press Agency:** When do you expect that the meeting will conclude and when will you be able to brief us on that? Are you seeing any new strains or new DNA emerging from this 'flu and will the UN, as I see with Dr Nabarro, be participating in the efforts to constrain the spread of the disease?

**Gregory Hartl:** what we understand is that a great number of these viruses from the various locations are genetically quite similar if not identical. WHO is the United Nations system lead on health as our name would imply and the response to this event, the technical expertise from this event all comes from WHO, but certainly this event, especially if it evolves into a pandemic, is an event which is going to necessitate that we all work together as much as possible and certainly Dr Chan has already been liaising on a regular basis with all our UN partners.

**Gregory Hartl:** The Emergency Committee is meeting now. It is not guaranteed that a decision on phase change will be taken. This is one reason also why I wanted to meet you now to keep the 17.00hrs time slot active because we might have to come back later and say "no decision tonight, maybe again tomorrow or in the coming days". But there is a good likelihood that something will happen without prejudging the committee. The previous meeting on Saturday lasted two hours with then the notifications of our various national focal points and we were able to go public with that at about 8 or 9 o'clock, so I would expect that that would be the same time frame we are looking at tonight. We cannot give you an exact time for the follow-on virtual press conference this evening and



we shall keep you informed. The email alerts when we know anything with any more precision.