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Carlos Navarro

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AH1N1 Virus Reappears in Mexico in Early 2014; No Health Emergency Declared

by Carlos Navarro

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There was a time when the mention of AH1N1 flu brought extreme concern, even a sense of panic, to the Mexican public. This was especially the case in the aftermath of the pandemic that followed the outbreak of the virus in central Mexico in March and April 2009. The AH1N1 virus, also known at that time as swine flu, infected 70,000 Mexicans, resulting in 1,300 deaths ([SourceMex, April 29, 2009](#), and [May 6, 2009](#)). The outbreak brought Mexico's economy to a standstill during the second quarter of the year ([SourceMex, Sept. 2, 2009](#)), and tourism declined sharply for a good part of the year ([SourceMex, Aug. 5, 2009](#)).

The 2009 pandemic caught authorities unprepared, and this contributed to the panic that ensued. Many Mexicans had not received a flu vaccination that year, but this probably would not have helped protect the population against a strain that had not been prevalent in Mexico before.

The crisis forced Mexican health authorities to become better prepared to meet the challenge, including launching a vaccination and prevention campaign and procuring an adequate supply of medicines needed to treat the disease. Still, because of uncertainty about the virus, authorities kept a health alert in place until June 29, 2010.

By the time the next significant outbreak occurred in 2012, authorities were better prepared, and the panic that had prevailed in 2009 was no longer present ([SourceMex, March 7, 2012](#)).

Nearly 3,700 cases reported this year

The AH1N1 virus has reappeared in the first several weeks of 2014, with the Secretaría de Salud (SSA) reporting almost 3,700 cases of influenza between Jan. 1 and Feb. 7, including more than 3,110 of AH1N1 infections. Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, Nuevo León, Michoacán, and México states and the Federal District reported the largest number of infections.

There were 421 influenza-related deaths during the period, including 390 patients infected with the AH1N1 strain, two with the AH3N2 virus, one from type B influenza, and the remaining 28 deaths from other strains of the virus. The largest number of influenza-related deaths thus far this year have been reported in Jalisco, Baja California, and the Federal District.

Despite the moderately high number of flu deaths, the outbreak did not attract the same type of front-page headlines as the 2009 pandemic. "The major difference between the situation we experienced in 2009 and now is that we have access to better medical information and an ample supply of vaccines, which have been distributed throughout the country," said Enrique Ramos Flores, tourism secretary in Jalisco state, which had reported about 481 cases since the start of the year. A total of 44 people have died from flu-related causes in Jalisco, the highest number in the country.

Furthermore, the SSA now considers the AH1N1 flu virus responsible for the 2009 pandemic a seasonal virus. Celia Mercedes Alpuche Aranda, director of the infectious diseases division at the

Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública (INSP), said her agency has been in close contact with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and they have confirmed no dangerous changes in the status of the virus in Mexico. "We have not discovered any AH1N1 mutations that would make this virus more deadly," Alpuche said in an interview with CNNMéxico.

Health authorities noted that the AH1N1 virus is following normal patterns this year, infecting primarily young and middle-aged adults, ages 30 to 55. "This doesn't mean that adults older than 60 cannot contract the virus, but the epidemiological evidence indicates that it occurs in younger people," said Alpuche.

"More than 66% of the deaths this year have occurred among young adults with certain characteristics, such as a compromised immune system" said Cuitláhuac Ruiz Matus, the SSA's director of epidemiology.

Furthermore, Ruiz Matus noted, more than 80% of those who died had not been vaccinated against the AH1N1 virus. The SSA, he said, distributed more the 90% of the 25 million vaccines to health centers around the country since the start of the flu season in October. The remaining 10% are available to health centers to use for at-risk populations.

"The state health services, which are autonomous, have taken their own measures, and we have provided them with all the support they need, including evaluation of their systems and ensuring that they receive the proper information," said the SSA epidemiologist.

No impact on tourism

Ramos Flores said the outbreak has had no adverse effects on tourism in Jalisco, with the number of national and foreign visitors to the state thus far this year on par with recent years. The Jalisco tourism official said foreign governments have issued no health alerts for citizens planning to visit Mexico, a trend that is favorable for the Mexican tourism industry.

The state of Baja California, which reported 41 flu-related deaths since the start of the year, has also not seen any discernible negative impact to its tourism industry. "We have all taken the necessary precautions and followed the protocols established five years ago," said Alan Bautista Plascencia, director of the Comité de Turismo y Convenciones de Tijuana (Cotuco). "At this moment, we do not have any statistics or a reliable source to tell us whether [the AH1N1 outbreak] has reduced tourist activity."

Federal Tourism Secretary Claudia Ruiz Massieu also downplayed the potential impact of the outbreak on tourist activity in Mexico. Speaking to reporters during a recent visit to Campeche state in mid-February, the tourism secretary said the publicity about the AH1N1 virus and the violence in Michoacán state ([SourceMex, Jan. 22, 2014](#)) will not deter foreigners from visiting Mexico.

Ruiz Massieu said she expected revenues from tourism to surpass those for 2013. "Last year, we obtained about US\$12.7 billion in revenues in the tourism sector," said the secretary. "We anticipate a growth of about 8% this year."

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