



*In this issue of "Health Matters," we offer the facts on bird flu as well as the more common human influenza virus. Two Aspen Valley Hospital (AVH) employees helped in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina — you can read about their medical clinic in a music room and the AVH donation to the Red Cross on Page 4. In addition, AVH recently embarked on a new hospital initiative and is proud to introduce new behavioral health services in this issue.*

## Learn the facts about the bird flu

As avian influenza, or bird flu, continues to raise concerns around the world, it is important to remember that this viral infection affects mainly birds and does not usually infect humans. The H5N1 virus that has caused outbreaks in Asia and Europe is seen as a potential danger because scientists believe it may one day be able to spread from person to person. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and other groups are monitoring the bird flu closely in case the virus does become a widespread threat to humans.

However, there is no need to panic, and knowing the facts can help ease unnecessary fears, says Kathy Gibbard, RN, Infection Control and Employee Health Coordinator for Aspen Valley Hospital.

"Wild birds are the hosts for the virus, but they don't get sick," Gibbard says. "However, the wild birds migrate and pass the virus along to domestic birds, mainly poultry. Since birds spread the virus, it easily crosses geographic borders. However, we haven't seen it in the United States at all."

Most cases of human infection have been the result of contact with infected poultry, feces or contaminated surfaces. "Bird viruses mutate rapidly," Gibbard says. "We've seen bird-to-human cases, and a few cases we think are human-to-human transmission, but we don't yet see a rapid human-to-human mode. When the H5N1 virus mutates to a human-to-human transmission mode, it could cause extensive infection.

"If that happens, we may start looking at a pandemic."

One primary concern is that humans have built up no resistance or antibodies to the bird flu. "Even 20-, 30- or 40-year-olds that usually fight off the flu with a good immune system won't have an advantage," Gibbard says. "It gets everybody."

In humans, bird flu symptoms usually appear as a typical flu-like illness, but life-threatening complications can develop quickly. The standard flu treatment includes medications Tamiflu (oseltamavir) and Relenza (zanamavir). These drugs, however, are not proven to work against bird flu, and additional research is needed.

"We're assuming that because Tamiflu works with the bird-to-human virus, that it would work as well with the human-to-human virus," Gibbard says. "That's something we won't know until we get there." In addition, like any flu virus, the bird flu can develop a resistance to these anti-viral drugs through subsequent mutations.

"Although we've seen pandemics in the past, we never know when or if a pandemic will happen," Gibbard says. "It may be that this virus will never make that human-to-human genetic shift, and this particular strain will just die out."



# Flu season is here again

You hear it every year about this time: Something seems to be going around, and it's usually the flu. Influenza can be caused by any of several human flu viruses that are spread through secretions from sneezing, coughing, or even talking. Most flu sufferers experience familiar symptoms such as fever, chills, weakness, aches, sore throat, cough, and nausea.



*Frequent hand washing is one way to help fight the flu.*

For some sufferers, however, serious complications can develop and potentially prove fatal.

"Influenza is a severe respiratory illness," says Kathy Gibbard, RN, Infection Control and Employee Health Coordinator. "It can knock you down and make you sick for seven to 10 days. Then you spend the next seven to 10 days trying to recuperate."

"If you recognize your flu symptoms within the first 48 hours, Tamiflu might be able to knock that virus down before it takes over your body," Gibbard says. "Once a virus gets into your system, it has to work its way out. Antibiotics will do no good for a flu — they're for bacterial infections, not viral infections."

If you already have the flu, stay at home to avoid infecting others, and use over-the-counter pain relievers to manage fever and pain.

Serious complications usually affect high-risk individuals, including those with chronic lung disease, heart or kidney disease, diabetes, tuberculosis, cystic fibrosis, severe anemia or a compromised immune system. Others at increased risk include anyone over age 50, nursing home residents.

"One of the problems with flu viruses is that they can live on surfaces," Gibbard says. "They're spread through droplets that spray out of the nose and mouth, travel two or three feet, and drop. You pick them up off those surfaces with your hand and spread the virus further."

"Don't cough into your hand, as we've all been taught, because you spread the virus every time you touch someone or something," Gibbard adds. "Instead, cough into your sleeve; the chance of contaminating people and objects with your sleeve is much less than with your hand."

## Doctor joins AVH staff in unique role

The field of psychiatry is not new to Alan Nelson, MD. While most recently Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at Loma Linda University School of Medicine in California, he also had a private practice in the Roaring Fork Valley for many years. But his current role as Medical Director of Behavioral Health Services at Aspen Valley Hospital (AVH) is new — both for Dr. Nelson and for AVH — since the position was only recently created in response to a growing need for psychiatric care.

Dr. Nelson provides a variety of services, including assisting emergency physicians with their patients. "Specialty assistance is needed at the hospital," said Dr. Nelson, "especially in the emergency department. Patients present with problems ranging from personal crises to complicated bipolar illness, and consultation with a specialist can help provide the best possible care."

One difficult aspect of managing the psychiatric patient is managing their medication needs. "Psychotropic drugs — those used for mental and behavioral problems — are complex and specialized and difficult for those not regularly providing psychiatric care to keep up with," Dr. Nelson said.

While AVH is not licensed as a mental health facility, it does participate in a larger mental health system. Dr. Nelson works with counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and mental health institutions/agencies.

Dr. Nelson's responsibilities include:

- Education of staff regarding care and treatment of psychiatric patients.
- Design and evaluation of services related to mental and behavioral disorders.



*Alan Nelson, MD*

- Development and implementation of protocols to facilitate timely and effective care.
- Psychiatric consultations for patients in times of crisis or other need.
- Facilitation of patient transfer and admission to appropriate facilities.

Dr. Nelson's administrative role is part-time, with the bulk of his time being spent in private practice. He has office hours in Carbondale and Aspen. Appointments can be made by calling 963-1588.

# At the heart of Katrina

Yahoo! knows where it is, but not many maps show Pearlington, Mississippi. It's on Route 90, south of Interstate 10, right on the Louisiana-Mississippi border. After Hurricane Katrina destroyed most of this small community, Aspen Valley Hospital Emergency Department's Chris Martinez, MD, Steve Ayers, MD, paramedic Eric Guthmann, RN, and Cre Donovan, RN, went there to provide medical care for residents.

"The whole Roaring Fork Valley focused their interest, energies and resources on Pearlington," Eric said. "They were looking for a small town that wasn't getting a lot of help. This one took a direct hit from the eye of Katrina."

The first AVH team to arrive consisted of Chris and Eric, who helped set up Pearlington's medical clinic. Due to the widespread devastation, there weren't many structures in the community that could house the clinic. One of the only public buildings still standing was part of the local



*Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of the Pearlington, Miss. community.*

elementary school. An eight-foot flood line was visible on some of the walls, but the 40-foot-by-20-foot music room was not as extensively damaged as other parts of the building, so it became the medical clinic.

Chris and Eric addressed general physical and mental health problems for hundreds of residents in the area. "They had significant primary care issues," Chris said.

"High blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and asthma are rampant among the residents here. Because of mold and mildew, we saw a lot of patients coming in for upper respiratory problems. Eric even came down with one cough we nicknamed 'The Pearlington Crud.'

"There were quite a few challenges for us – some expected, some not," he added. "Meals were hit or miss, but we did have showers that were hot 95

percent of the time. In the clinic, we had limited lab capabilities. Eric had to search for a battery for the only defibrillator, and he was able to connect us to the hospital's drug information center through the Internet."

Once Chris and Eric returned to AVH, Steve and Cre set out for Pearlington. "We helped the residents get back on track with their medical needs, and gave them the ability to see a doctor again," Steve said. "It was good to be able to go there and help."

## Helping those in need

Employees, physicians, and volunteers of Aspen Valley Hospital (AVH) contributed over \$10,000 for the victims of Hurricane Katrina this fall. The donation was then tripled through matching pledges of \$10,000 from both AVH and the Aspen Valley Medical Foundation. A check was sent to the American Red Cross in October. Thanks to our very generous staff for helping those in need.

In addition, two doctors and two nurses went to hurricane-ravaged Pearlington, Mississippi, to provide medical care to residents there.



*Cre Donovan, RN, takes care of a patient in the Pearlington clinic following Hurricane Katrina.*

# AVH medical staff honors Aspen student



The Aspen Valley Hospital Medical Staff recently awarded an \$8,000 scholarship to local honor student Derek Ward. He is the son of Tom and Donna Ward. Derek was born at Aspen Valley Hospital and is a graduate of Aspen High School.

Derek is a first-year medical student at the University of California, San Francisco. He graduated cum laude from

Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, where he was a history and art history major. Part of the history honors program, Derek won the William Bradford Turner Class of 1914 prize for "best thesis in American history."

Following graduation from Williams College, Derek completed a pre-med program at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. He then went to Africa to participate in two separate AIDS programs through "Save the Children" and the Center for Infectious Disease Research.

Derek was accepted to eight different medical schools, including Yale and Harvard. The Aspen Valley Hospital Medical Staff is proud to support Derek in his medical training and wishes him the very best!

# Superior Performance Initiative

In recent years, the public has become more attuned to how hospitals perform their work. Aspen Valley Hospital (AVH) and its sister VHA hospitals (non-profit, community hospitals) are doing their part through a special strategy to provide a comprehensive view of performance, identify plans for improvement, and advance achievement to superior levels. All aspects of the program are data-driven, measurable, and reported each month in public board meetings.

The program focuses on clinical quality, patient safety, the patient experience, workforce management, finance/operations, and community benefit. At AVH, leaders for each domain have been identified and are charged with tracking progress, identifying opportunities for improvement, and implementing changes.

In addition, AVH participates in the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's "100,000 Lives" campaign, which focuses on six basic approaches to patient safety. "There is no more important endeavor than to monitor and continuously improve quality," said CEO Dave Ressler. "We are happy to be a part of these projects and are seeing improvements already."



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