

## Rockdale Citizen

### Gearing up: Rockdale Medical Center prepares for flu season

**By Jay Jones**

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Staff Photos: Jay Jones

Rockdale Medical Center Registered nurses Scottie Tuttle, left, and Patty Frame demonstrate how they clean up after treating a patient exhibiting flu-like symptoms by wiping down an examination table in the Emergency Department. The hospital implemented new procedures in preparation for an expected heavy influenza season, particularly with concern over the H1N1 flu virus.



CONYERS - Rockdale Medical Center staff members said they will be ready if there is an outbreak of the novel H1N1 flu virus, commonly called the swine flu.

Vanessa Dameron, RMC emergency preparedness coordinator, said that after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the terrorist attacks of 2001 the hospital here, as with hospitals across the country, has spent a considerable amount of time anticipating hazards and developing plans to address them.

Dameron said that the hazard identified this year is a possible H1N1 flu pandemic. Dameron said the work that she and Joi Fox, RMC manager of infectious diseases, do can be described best by the Boy Scouts' motto: Be Prepared.

"Since April, we have been monitoring all the Web sites about information and taking the lead of the (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) for the guidance they put out for procedures," Dameron said. "And it changes. They call this a novel influenza, and that just means it's a new virus. So, as we learn more about this virus, the way we handle it and the guidelines may change."

She noted one change was that schools were advised early on to shut down when an H1N1 flu case was confirmed. Today, schools and other institutions are advised to isolate

A sign on the front doors of RMC's Emergency Department asks patients with flu symptoms to wear face masks upon entering the building. The sign is just one of several measures put in place to protect medical staff from the flu and provide care for patients.

individuals and work to keep regular operations continuing.

At the hospital, Dameron and Fox explained that staff members have discussed the basics to avoid the flu by practicing personal hygiene with hand washing, coughing into the crooks of their arms and liberal use of hand sanitizer.

Hospital staffers are required to receive vaccinations for both the seasonal and H1N1 flu. The staff in the Emergency Department has also been issued masks to wear while caring for those with flu symptoms.

"We try to educate our staff - that's the biggest thing," Dameron said. "We want to decrease any panic surrounding this crisis. With everything said, this will not be over in a few weeks. This is going to be a long marathon that we're in. We are just going to have to be prepared and take things as they come."

As part of that preparedness, patients at RMC's Emergency Department will notice a new sign at the door when they enter. It lists common flu symptoms and requests patients to put on a mask once inside, use tissue when they cough and apply hand sanitizer.

Dameron urged people who have flu symptoms to call their personal doctors first. Despite all the information coming out about the flu, the best treatment remains rest and to avoid contact with the general public.

"The best point of contact is with your private doctor," she said. "Call them and tell them the symptoms. The physicians' offices may get overcrowded also. Take their lead - if they say come in, come in, and if they think advice over the phone will help, take that."

The H1N1 flu has primary symptoms that include a fever of 104 or higher, severe headaches and either vomiting or diarrhea. Those in age groups 0 to 4 years of age and 35 years or younger are more likely to be vulnerable to the H1N1 flu, Dameron said.

Those who do arrive at the hospital will be tested to determine what type of flu virus they have. Those showing serious symptoms will be placed in an isolated room while those with lesser symptoms can be placed in areas with other patients exhibiting similar symptoms.

Dameron said the system is set up to determine what possible treatment is needed and then move patients through. Most will be sent home, but those with serious conditions will be admitted to the hospital.

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