

Remarks Following a Cabinet Meeting and an Exchange With Reporters
May 1, 2009

The President. All right. Well, thank you, everybody. It's been just over a week since we've learned about this novel strain of the flu virus that's now affected people in at least 11 countries—or at least 11 of our States as well as 11 other countries. And throughout this process, my top priority has been the health and the safety of the American people. And to that end, we've closely monitored the situation.

I am extraordinarily proud of the work that's been done by the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as the Department of Homeland Security and the CDC. We've got Dr. Richard Besser here, as well as Janet Napolitano; they've been really leading the charge. We've now brought in the cavalry with Secretary Sebelius.

We're, obviously, focused on what needs to be done immediately: identifying and mitigating cases of H1N1 in the United States; repositioning antiviral treatments for those who are infected and making sure that they are distributed appropriately around the country; providing clear guidance as well as the best science to our State and local officials as they move forward; and speaking clearly to the American people, as I did the evening of the news conference, about the mitigation steps that they personally can take.

But we also need to prepare for the long term, since we know that these kinds of threats can emerge at any moment. Even if it turns out that the H1N1 is relatively mild on the front end, it could come back in a more virulent form during the actual flu season. And that's why we are investing in our public health infrastructure. We've had discussions about the production of vaccines for—in anticipation of the flu season. And we've made sure that all our agencies here are coordinating; that they have appropriate action plans; that we, for example, are working with the Department of Education to provide clear guidelines for school closures; that we are working with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, for example, to ensure that businesses are supportive of their hourly workers who need to stay home but may be worried about losing their jobs because they don't have sick leave, making sure that they are cooperating in what is going to be an overarching effort; discussions with our Secretary of State as well as our Ambassador to the United Nations about how we're going to respond to potential requests from other countries for assistance in dealing with this issue.

Overall, I'm very pleased with the progress that we've made. I think that those who have been on top of this have done an extraordinary job. I'm optimistic that we're going to be able to manage this effectively, but we still have more work to do, and I'm glad I've got such a great team doing it. And I want to make clear to everybody—and the reason I brought this Cabinet meeting together is—that we are taking this very seriously and we will take every single step that's necessary to make sure that the American people are safe.

One last point I want to make, because this was actually raised during this meeting; somebody asked, "Why is this different from other flus?" We don't know for certain that this will end up being more severe than other seasonal flus that we have. It's been noted, I think, before that you have over 36,000 die on average every year from seasonal flus; you have 200,000 hospitalizations.

It may turn out that H1N1 is—runs its course like ordinary flus, in which case we will have prepared, and we won't need all these preparations. The reason that people are concerned is—the scientists are concerned is this is a new strain. So what happens is, is that Americans and people around the world have not built up immunity in the same way that they've built up immunity to the seasonal flus that we're accustomed to. Those seasonal flus may change, mutate slightly from year to year, but they're all roughly in the same band. When you have a new strain, then potentially our immune systems can't deal with it as effectively. And there are indications that in Mexico, at least, what you saw were relatively young, healthy people die from these—from the H1N1, rather than people whose immune system is already compromised, older individuals, very small infants, and so forth.

So that's why we're taking it seriously. We have not yet seen those same kinds of fatalities here in the United States among young, healthy people with noncompromised immune systems, but we want to make sure that we're preparing appropriately.

So I just want everybody to be clear that this is why this is a cause for concern but not alarm. We are essentially ensuring that in the worst-case scenario we can manage this appropriately, government, working with businesses and individuals in the private sector, end up containing an outbreak and that we can, ultimately, get through this.

So thank you very much, everybody. Hope you guys have a great weekend.

Supreme Court

Q. What are you looking for in a Supreme Court nominee?

Q. Can you comment on the news about Justice Souter?

The President. No Supreme Court questions.

Q. No Supreme Court questions? What are you looking for in a nominee? [*Laughter*]

The President. Have a great weekend, guys.

Q. You too, Mr. President.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:37 p.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Richard E. Besser, Acting Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Secretary of Homeland Security Janet A. Napolitano; Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius; Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton; and Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

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