

Are companies ready for a pandemic?

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COMPANIES here must prepare themselves for a global influenza pandemic, to minimise the damage caused by widespread disruptions such as a drastic loss of workers, travel restrictions and a supply crunch.

Though the Government has been planning for such a crisis for years and will try to cushion its impact, private firms had to put in the time and money for pandemic planning, said Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng yesterday.

A pandemic, which could be caused by a mutated strain of the avian influenza virus, could hit up to 70 million people worldwide and cost US\$3 trillion dollars (S\$4.5 trillion), according to the United Nations and World Bank, and is considered one of the world's biggest threats.

'While the Government will do all we can to mitigate the impact of a pandemic, we will need the cooperation of the private sector to sustain the economy and the population, and for the community to take personal responsibility for their own health and well-being,' said DPM Wong, who is also Home Affairs Minister and chairman of the Homefront Crisis Ministerial Committee on Bird Flu.

Drawing lessons from the 2003 Sars outbreak, the Government has in place wide-ranging measures in case a pandemic strikes. Apart from strategies like stockpiling medicine, it has put in place a suite of non-medical measures ranging from enforcing quarantine orders to supplying necessities such as food and power.

While a multi-sector approach was the most sensible way to reduce the impact of a pandemic, Mr Wong acknowledged that persuading non-health sectors to devote the resources to pandemic planning would be a challenging and long-drawn process.

To help private sector emergency planners, his ministry has come up with a book on influenza and the roles of the Government, private sector and community on the national response plan, he announced yesterday.

Emergency planners can download the book - [Preparing For A Human](#)

Influenza Pandemic In Singapore - from the Ministry of Home Affairs website, www.mha.gov.sg or the Ministry of Health website, www.moh.gov.sg.

Some companies have already taken the plunge.

Last September, the financial sector's pandemic contingency plans were tested, with a simulated flu outbreak that 'struck' over 140 companies, including banks, stockbrokers, and insurers.

Firms like SingPost, too, have measures in place to prevent disruptions to mail services. It has its own stockpiles of antiviral drugs, and plans to perform health screenings for all staff.

Speaking at a conference on pandemic preparedness in Asia, organised by Nanyang Technological University's **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies**, DPM Wong stressed the need for countries and organisations to test their contingency plans.

'Untested strategies on paper are just as good as not having any contingency plans because these strategies may well fail the moment a pandemic starts,' he warned.