Flu Overhyped? Some Say Officials 'Cried Swine'

By Lindsey Tanner AP Medical Writer

In this May 4, 2009 file photo, Fred Moiola Elementary School students, from left, Sammy Arne, Alix Gast and Kyle Edwards ride their bikes outside the closed school in Fountain Valley, Calif. The school is closed for swine flu sanitizing. Schools shut down, parties were canceled and working parents stuck at home with healthy kids and over abundance of hand sanitizer. All for an outbreak that seems no worse than a mild flu season. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

CHICAGO (AP) — Did government health officials "cry swine" when they sounded the alarm on what looked like a threatening new flu? The so-far mild swine flu outbreak has many people saying all the talk about a devastating global epidemic was just fear-mongering hype. But that's not how public health officials see it, calling complacency the thing that keeps them up at night. The World Health Organization added a scary-sounding warning Thursday, predicting up to 2 billion people could catch the new flu if the outbreak turns into a global epidemic. Many blame such alarms and the breathless media coverage for creating an overreaction that disrupted many people's lives. Schools shut down, idling even healthy kids and forcing parents to stay home from work; colleges scaled back or even canceled graduation ceremonies; a big Cinco de Mayo celebration in Chicago was canned; face masks and hand sanitizers sold out — all because of an outbreak that seems no worse than a mild flu season. "I don't know anyone who has it. I haven't met anyone who knows anyone who contracted it," said Carl Shepherd, a suburban Chicago video producer and father of two. "It's really frightening more people than it should have. It's like crying wolf." Two weeks after news broke about the new flu strain, there have been 46 deaths — 44 in Mexico and two in the United States. More than 2,300 are sick in 26 countries, including about 900 U.S. cases. Those are much lower numbers than were feared at

the start based on early reports of an aggressive and deadly flu in Mexico. Miranda Smith, whose graduation ceremony at Cisco Junior College in central Texas was canceled to avoid spreading the flu, blames the media. "It's been totally overblown," she said Thursday. "Everyone seems to know it's not going to kill you and it's not as deadly as they think," she said. "Everybody needs to just calm down and chill out." Craig Heyl of Decatur, Ga., said the government overreacted. "Swine flu is just another strain of flu. People get the flu. I guess you have to call it a pandemic when it's a widespread virus, but I don't think the severity of it is all that concerning," said Heyl, 43. Public health authorities acknowledge their worst fears about the new virus have not materialized. But no one's officially saying it's time to relax. And experts worry that people will become too complacent and tune out the warnings if the virus returns in a more dangerous form in the fall. "People are taking a sigh of relief too soon," said Dr. Richard Besser, acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In an interview Wednesday with The Associated Press, Besser said the outbreak in the United States appears to be less severe than was first feared. But the virus is still spreading and its future potential as a killer is not clearly understood. "The measures we've been talking about — the importance of handwashing, the importance of covering coughs, the real responsibility for staying home when you're sick and keeping your children home when you're sick — I'm afraid that people are going to say, 'Ah, we've dodged a bullet. We don't need to do that,'" Besser said. "The thing that's keeping me up right now is that feeling of dodging the bullet," he added. Peter Sandman, a risk communication specialist, says on his Web site that reminding people the risk is still real and warning them in the future if a pandemic looks imminent "will be extremely difficult." "Swine flu looks to be an extremely mild pandemic if it goes pandemic at all, despite WHO warnings that it may 'come back with a vengeance' in the fall. People are going to be very, very skeptical," Sandman wrote. That concern is shared by infectious disease specialists. But elsewhere, especially online, talk of hype is rampant. "If I hear 1+ person freaking out because of the "Swine Flu" they won't have 2 worry about dying from it. I will kill them w/ my handbag!" read a comment Wednesday on Twitter. "Adults are acting like a bunch of crybabies in a B-rated science fiction germ-outbreak movie, wringing their hands, whining about what to do next," Dallas Morning News reader Mark Thompson wrote in a letter to the editor posted online Wednesday. Kari Carsey Valente of Lake Oswego, Ore., had similar thoughts in a letter on the Oregonian newspaper's Web site. "Is the daily front page body count really necessary? In reading the entire content of the collected articles one learns that the H1N1 strain is not likely to be more lethal than its predecessors. Give it a rest — and lots of liquid!," Valente wrote. Colt Ables, 22, an economics major at the University of Texas in Arlington, said he thinks the Obama administration overreacted and unfairly tried to make it seem as if Republicans have been soft on preparedness. "This shouldn't be about politics or about hyping up a virus to send the American people into a panic. Do yourself a favor, wash your hands and turn off the TV," he wrote in a campus newspaper column. Whether the media overhyped or accurately reported the dangers is a toss-up, according to a USA Today/Gallup poll published Thursday on Americans' views of the media's flu coverage. The May 5 poll also found that concern about the flu peaked a week ago. But even then, only 25 percent of Americans said they worried about getting the virus. Dr. Robert Daum, a University of Chicago infectious disease expert, says authorities acted properly when news first broke about the new flu strain. "It's like overcalling a snowstorm in

Chicago. You want the plows out even if it's only going to snow a flake," Daum said. If not, and a blizzard hits, "there will be an outcry like you've never seen before." Still, Daum says authorities have been a bit awkward in "downshifting" now that it appears the U.S. situation isn't dire. "I think it was right to place everyone on high alert, and now right to say it's time to calm down," Daum said. *Medical Writer Lindsey Tanner reported from Chicago and Medical Writer Mike Stobbe reported from Atlanta.*

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