H1N1 Generates New Disaster Plans

Maggie Fox, Reuters

Stung by the continuing struggle to make a vaccine against the swine flu pandemic, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said on Tuesday her department would review its approach to disaster preparedness. The goal, Sebelius said, will be streamlined regulations that speed the approval of new technologies being promoted through government contracts with private companies.

Sebelius said about 70 million swine flu vaccine doses are available or have been ordered and administered – far short of the goal which was to have all priority groups vaccinated by this week, a total of 160 million people. A large part of the problem has come from difficulties making the vaccine using 1950s era egg-based technology.

“There are gaps at every stage in the process, from labor to factory floor, that are stalling our development of key countermeasures,” Sebelius told a meeting of the American Medical Association. “We don't know what's coming - the next public health emergency we face could be much worse. We're going to look at how our policies affect every step of countermeasure development and production and then ask ‘how can we do better?’

“Under the review I've announced today, we'll look for the fastest ways to move to new technologies that will let us quickly produce countermeasures that are more dependable and more robust, not just for flu and not just for infectious diseases, but for all the public health threats we face today,” Sebelius said.

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