

After-hours clinics struggle to cope with flu patients

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Flood of cases and staff off sick causing major difficulties in many health districts

by **Martin Johnston**
health reporter

Some of Auckland's after-hours medical clinics have suffered a double-hit of staff sickness and a flood of patients, as the winter flu season intensifies.

The region's Waitemata and Counties Manukau health districts have the country's highest per-capita rates of influenza-like consultations, according to ongoing surveillance for the Health Ministry at "sentinel" general practices, although Canterbury has been worst affected this winter.

It appears that the Auckland region outbreaks are highly localised.

While some general practitioners told the *Herald* yesterday they were seeing relatively few flu-like cases, the White Cross group, which runs after-hours accident and medical clinics,

reported a big increase. "We've been seeing a lot of influenza-type illness in the last four to six weeks, particularly in our Glenfield, New Lynn and Henderson clinics," said chief executive Dr Alistair Sullivan.

"They are running about 15 to 20 per cent above normal volumes for this time of year — an extra 50 to 100 patients per day across those three.

"A lot of staff — nurses and doctors — are coming down sick as well."

Up to 15 per cent of staff were off sick at any one time, which was unusually high, even for winter, Dr Sullivan said. Senior management, including himself, were having to help fill some shifts at short notice.

He agreed the outbreaks were localised, saying the White Cross' Otahuhu and central Auckland clinics had not been affected.



He was uncertain why this was.

Christchurch virus expert Dr Lance Jennings said the outbreak of influenza in his city, dominated by the A

WHAT TO DO

If you think you have influenza:

- Stay home and rest, away from other people.
- Sip fluids often.
- If you have an underlying medical condition, you are pregnant or your symptoms worsen, see your doctor or phone Healthline on 0800 611 116.
- Phone your doctor before visiting, if possible.

Influenza symptoms include:

- High fever
- Headache
- Chills
- Muscle aches
- Cough

ing many influenza-like cases, while other GPs saw few.

The hospital had set up an influenza isolation ward and had cancelled elective surgery for a week, Dr Jennings said.

Spokeswomen for the Waitemata and Counties district health boards said yesterday their hospitals were running at capacity, but this was because of a variety of ailments.

"It is not because of influenza," Waitemata spokeswoman Ashley Campbell said of her board's hospitals. "It's the usual general mix of illnesses; just more of it than normal."

The state-funded influenza vaccination is available until July 31 for people with a specified range of health problems, those aged 65 or older and pregnant women.

Dr Jennings said the vaccination was up to 90 per cent effective in healthy adults of up to middle age, but less effective for the elderly, although it reduced the risk of complications such as pneumonia and death.

(H3N2) strain, had also been localised at first, with after-hours clinics, the Christchurch Public Hospital's emergency department and some GPs see-