



# Cleaning & Restoration™

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## Sorting & Cleaning Rugs

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## Pandemic Preparation for Cleaning & Restoration Contractors

**B**y the time you are reading this we will already be into the 2009-2010 flu season. Given the unusual nature (see sidebar) of the closely watched “swine” flu, many cleaning and restoration contractors are trying to determine if this situation presents a business opportunity, and if so, how to approach it sensibly.

The long history of general infection control, as well as current documents from the World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Department of Health and Human Services, all agree that controlling outbreaks of infectious agents, including the swine flu, involves a combination of behavioral changes and enhanced cleaning. Since restoration contractors are generally familiar with appropriate equipment, chemicals and procedures for cleaning microscopic contaminants, this article will focus more on the behaviors and preparatory steps that should be instituted by contractors who want to provide services to organizations trying to cope with the effects of a pandemic.

### Protect Your People First

A cleaning or restoration contractor cannot provide valuable services to clients if its own team members are adversely impacted by the disease they are trying to eliminate or prevent. Protecting the technicians is not enough. The tough economic times of the last few years have

forced most companies to trim staff to the bare essentials, so if the receptionist who provides initial information on services to potential clients is out sick, either people have to be pulled from the field or business opportunities are lost. Therefore, all staff members should be educated regarding appropriate personal behavior that can minimize the spread of infectious agents. Pamphlets and posters can be obtained from a variety of credible sources regarding:

- Cough etiquette
- Proper hand washing
- Use of surgical masks to minimize the spread of bacterial and viral contaminants from individuals who are suspected or proven to be contagious

(See [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov); [www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pan-demic/en](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pan-demic/en); and [www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/work-placeplanning/index.html](http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/work-placeplanning/index.html))

Unfortunately, having information and using it are two different things. Cleaning and restoration contractors must not only educate their team members about proper behavior, but they must adopt proper procedures and motivate individuals to incorporate them into their daily routines. Facilitating proper infection control behavior includes things as simple as purchasing enough boxes of tissues so that each employee has one at his or her work station.

It should also include the installation of hand sanitizing stations near restrooms and food preparation areas. Although it may seem



counter-intuitive, many experts recommend that hand sanitizing stations be installed outside of restrooms rather than inside. That way, if touch points such as bathroom door handles or push plates are contaminated, a person leaving the bathroom can sanitize his or her hands after touching the door.

Another small but important step that an employer can take to facilitate proper behavior is the strategic placement of wastebaskets so that hand towels can be used to open restroom doors and then be disposed of outside the restroom. Placing wastebaskets in easily accessible and visible locations in common areas so that used tissues and other debris can be quickly and properly disposed of is also helpful. Some infection control specialists feel that wastebaskets with self closing lids can be effective in controlling the spread of biological contaminants.

While it may sound reminiscent of your mother’s advice, closing the lid on a toilet before flushing has been shown to greatly reduce aerosolizing of “germs” from the stool. Employers who encourage

their staff members to utilize this practice and emphasize it by installing seats with lids on toilets that do not presently have them are showing their employees that they are willing to take both large and small steps to protect them.

### Practice What You Preach

The best way for cleaning and restoration contractors to gain expertise in specialized services that they offer to their customers is to incorporate those services into their own facilities. When was the last time that you looked at custodial practices for your own facility? Are you utilizing practices that reflect cleaning for health as well as cleaning to look clean? For example, are you:

1. Focusing your surface cleaning on touch points such as door handles, light switches, computer keyboards, mice, etc.?
2. Utilizing anti-microbial sprays or wipes and teaching your cleaning crew to use them properly (approximately four square feet of surface area or single critical touch point per side of disposable pre-wetted wipe)?
3. Migrating away from standard vacuum cleaners to HEPA filtered vacuums?
4. Vacuuming hard surfaces instead of using dry push mops?
5. Replacing string mops and water buckets with Swiffer™-style floor cleaning systems that use disposable pads and spray cleaner/sanitizer at the point of operation?
6. Providing appropriate personal protective equipment for those doing the cleaning, and meeting regulatory requirements by providing respiratory training and fit testing?
7. Installing auto-dispense disinfectants in toilet bowls and urinals in order to

## The Unusual Nature of the “Novel” Flu that is Circling the Globe

The current H1N1 “swine flu” is unusual in that this particular virus is:

- A recombinant strain that contains elements from four different sources, including two different pig viruses, a bird virus and a human virus.
- Such a particular gene combination that it “has not been seen anywhere, in any species, until its appearance in humans this spring.” (Scientists can track progress of flu in detail, *USA Today*, August 27, 2009, page 6D)
- Believed to have first jumped from swine to people in January 2009 and circulated undetected for three months.
- A strain that has shown the ability to jump across species multiple times with the initial infection from pigs to people followed by a reverse infection from a visitor to Mexico to swine on a farm in Canada, and then later introduction into turkeys from a worker on a poultry farm.
- Originating in Mexico instead of Asia as most new varieties of influenza do.
- Defying all efforts to contain it and is spreading across the globe before the start of the traditional flu season.
- Now so widespread that CDC discontinued official reporting of individual cases on July 24, 2009.
- Causing vomiting and diarrhea more than is typical for seasonal flu.
- Resulting in a very different pattern of serious problems from what is seen in seasonal influenza, where an estimated 90 percent of influenza-related deaths occur in people 65 years of age and older. In contrast, the number of deaths from H1N1 was highest among people 25 to 49 years of age (39 percent), followed by people 50 to 64 years of age (25 percent) and people five to 24 years of age (16 percent).
- Mutating so rapidly that a Tamiflu-resistant version developed from someone who was not even taking the drug.

restrict the growth of microorganisms in those critical fixtures between regular cleanings?

### Step It Up a Notch

The best way to provide solid information to customers regarding the types of cleaning practices and products that can be helpful in slowing the spread of an epidemic is to speak from personal experience. Are you offering to provide specialty sanitization services using foggers or new technology such as CO<sub>2</sub>/alcohol sprayers like the Bio-Mist? Why not apply those sanitizing systems in your own facility and document the results using a field test unit like the Bio-Reveal? (Lunch

room, bathroom fixtures, etc.) What better way to encourage your clients to be pro-active in protecting touch points from becoming disease transmission points than sanitizing them and then treating them with one of the new technology protectorants such as Bio-Shield 75?

Once you start thinking this way, step it up a notch by considering an often overlooked but daily utilized piece of equipment—your vehicles. When was the last time the cabs of your trucks or the interiors of the company’s cars were cleaned? Sanitizing them and applying a protectorant that prevents microbial growth significantly reduces the potential for employees cross contaminating the

facility from the work they are doing in other buildings. By employing these services in-house you can gain experience and add personal anecdotes to your discussions with clients.

You also need to think about the availability of critical materials for your operation, since it is difficult to provide services to clients if you don't have sufficient supplies. Therefore, give some careful thought to items that could cause a critical roadblock in your operations if they were gone, then stock up on those things that may be in short supply in the case of an epidemic. Pre-purchasing is especially wise for equipment and supplies with a long shelf life that can be used later if problems do not materialize. Some specific items that cleaning and restoration contractors may want to consider for

pre-purchase are filtering facepieces, surgical style gloves, protective suits, lab coats, microfiber cleaning cloths, sanitizing chemicals, and even HEPA filters for their vacuums and negative air machines.

### **The Connection Between Policies and Procedures**

The best preplanning will be ineffective if you do not develop and communicate the policies that you intend to follow in an influenza emergency situation. Rather than having to make snap decisions at the last moment about how to treat or pay ill workers, think about it now. Review your current policy manual and make adjustments to accommodate the following concerns:

1. Determine who will be responsible for responding to ill individuals in

the workplace, either through an established health clinic or as a first aid duty.

2. Share your plans with employees and clearly communicate expectations.
3. Examine policies for leave and employee compensation and review with managers, supervisors, and employees so they are up-to-date on sick leave policies, leave donation, and employee assistance services that are covered under the different employee-sponsored health plans. Leave policies should be flexible and non-punitive.
4. Plan for the possibility of unscheduled leave that encourages employees who are sick to stay at home to care for themselves and others who are ill with the flu or children dismissed from school.
5. Establish policies for flexible worksites (*e.g.*, telecommuting) and flexible work hours (*e.g.*, staggered shifts) if needed.
6. Communicate policies for employee access to, and availability of, health care, mental health, and social services including corporate and community resources.

### **Educate, Facilitate, Motivate**

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, an employer who wants to not only survive but also offer important services during influenza emergencies or other local events related to infectious contaminants needs to educate, facilitate and motivate its own team as well as its potential clients. I hope that this article has started you down that path. ■

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