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I recently attended the Operating Room Nurses of Alberta Association's 27th annual conference in Red Deer, Alberta. The theme of "surgical technologies ongoing practices" (STOP) supports the ongoing education and innovative technologies that we, as perioperative registered nurses must adhere to, to keep our practice current and valid. As fall and winter 2009 has arrived, much of the conversation in and outside the workplace is around the current pandemic we are experiencing. Based on an educational session I attended in Red Deer, I will discuss reducing workplace injury as it pertains to the H1N1 pandemic.

The speaker, Betty Barrett (RN, BN, CPN) focused on reducing workplace injuries. We must realize that safety in the Operating Room is most often directed towards safety of the patient. However, if we as nurses are not practicing guidelines for workplace health and safety, there will be less of us to keep our patients safe. A pandemic influenza, such as H1N1, presents a new biological hazard into our workplace and can cause an infection of the lungs and airways. Because most people will have no immunity to the virus, infection and illness rates and number of deaths are expected to be higher than during seasonal epidemics of normal influenza. Therefore, I will discuss how we can address workplace health and safety best practices during a pandemic influenza to preserve health and safety in our workplaces.

In a handout given to the attendees by Betty Barrett, titled Best Practice Guidelines for Workplace Health & Safety During Pandemic Influenza, we must break the chain of infection by preventing transmission. Cover your cough and sneezes, clean your hands, wear your personal protective equipment (PPE), and get vaccinated. If you develop symptoms of H1N1, take the week off to stop the spread in your workplace and take prophylactic antiviral medication.

The virus gains entry into the body through inhalation; however there are other entryways like contact with contaminated surfaces. So consider the following; after an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks, the expelled infected droplets travel 2 meters before falling to a surrounding surface. This can mean any piece of equipment or surface in our operating room, which then becomes a biological hazard for us to catch the virus. So remember workplace cleaning and social distancing are also some things we can control to protect and reduce workplace exposures during a pandemic of influenza.

In summary, we don't know how the H1N1 virus is going to affect our patients and workplace. However, the only thing certain about the virus is that nothing is certain. So let's do what we can to keep our workplace healthy and safe so we can do the same for our patients.