

## **Department of Health to sign first-ever Bilateral Agreement with Chihuahua State Health Services to implement the 2007-2008 Paso del Norte Seasonal Influenza Surveillance Pilot Project**

Seasonal influenza is responsible for some 36,000 deaths in the US and hundreds of deaths annually in New Mexico. While influenza is a reportable disease and is tracked annually throughout New Mexico and the US, it is not a disease that is systematically monitored in Mexico. The disease is suspected to have similar mortality and morbidity in Mexico as that in the US, especially in the US-Mexico Border Region wherein more than a million people cross north and south across the border every day for reasons of employment, commerce, and recreation. A better understanding of the incidence of seasonal influenza in Mexico would lead to better education of the public on how to limit the spread and severity of the disease, improved preparedness and treatment on the part of health authorities, and a reduction in the number of deaths related to flu and flu-related health complications.

The New Mexico Department of Health's Office of Border Health (OBH), in association with Epidemiology and Response Division, Infectious Disease Epidemiology Bureau (IDEB) and the Scientific Laboratory Division (SLD) will implement an innovative binational pilot project with Chihuahua State Health Services to improve capacity for detecting and treating seasonal influenza in the Juarez Health Jurisdiction. The "2007-2008 Paso del Norte Seasonal Influenza Surveillance Pilot Project" represents the first truly binational infectious disease surveillance project of its kind to be implemented on the US-Mexico Border.

Chihuahua Social Development Secretary Carlos Carrera and DOH Secretary Dr. Alfredo Vigil will sign a formal agreement to implement the pilot project in a ceremony on September 21 at the US-Mexico Border Health Commission office in Juarez. This bilateral agreement will be the first of its kind ever signed between the governments of Chihuahua and New Mexico for collaboration on binational project in the health sector.

On August 31, a Department of Health team from OBH, IDEB and SLD facilitated training of 14 epidemiologists, clinicians and laboratorians from Chihuahua State Health Services and 10 additional health professionals from DOH/Region 5, Texas State Department of Health Services-Region 9/10, El Paso City-County Health and Environmental District, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)/El Paso Quarantine Station in the application and registry of the Quicktest Influenza A+B procedure and in collecting specimens to be transported to SLD for culturing. Active influenza surveillance will begin at the Juarez Health Clinic on October 1, 2007 and will continue through May 18, 2008, the traditional flu season.

The Juarez Health Clinic will serve as a sentinel site for flu surveillance and data on the incidence and type of flu will be transmitted weekly to DOH/ERD and added to the existing New Mexico Influenza Surveillance Network. SLD will process flu cultures for 15 samples taken from patients at the Juarez Health Clinic to confirm accuracy of the Quicktests. Flu prevalence data will be assimilated and analyzed on a weekly and monthly basis and simultaneously shared with Chihuahua State Health Services. Staffs from DOH Public Health Region 5, Texas Department of Health Region 9/10 and the CDC El Paso Quarantine Station will collaborate with follow-up in-service training and quality control, and cross-border transport of flu samples for culturing.

DOH/ERD is also establishing three more sentinel sites in the New Mexico border counties for surveillance of seasonal influenza using the Quicktests: Columbus, Luna County with Ben Archer Health Centers; and Sunland Park with La Clinica de Familia and the Emergency Room at Mountainview Regional Medical Center in Las Cruces, both in Doña Ana County. When these are added to the existing sentinel site at Hidalgo Medical Services in Lordsburg, Hidalgo County, DOH will have established the first border-wide influenza surveillance network in the State.

Based on the experience of this pilot project, DOH and Chihuahua State Health Services will explore the expansion of the surveillance network for areas including Palomas and Nuevo Casas Grandes (that front Luna and Hidalgo Counties) and possibly increase the number of sentinel sites in collaboration with Texas Department of State Health Services and El Paso City-County Health and Environmental District in El Paso County Texas and possibly the sister cities of Presidio Texas and Ojinaga, Chihuahua.

DOH is also hoping to develop and sign a framework collaborative agreement with Chihuahua State Health Services to facilitate future collaboration across a range of public health themes, including but not limited to: improved tuberculosis surveillance and binational case management; health emergency preparedness, including pandemic influenza; surveillance, treatment and reduction of sexually-transmitted diseases; development of a binational community health worker corps (*Promotoras*) and improved prenatal care in the Luna County-Palomas, Chihuahua binational corridor.

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From left to right: Ambassador Eleazar Benjamín Ruíz y Ávila, Executive Secretary, México Section, U.S. – México Border Health Commission; Dr. Alfredo Vigil, New Mexico Secretary of Health; and, Architect Carlos Carrera, Secretary, Secretariat of Social Development (Fomento Social) – Courtesy of the NMDOH/OBH