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Future Health Care Providers Learn to Avoid Infectious Diseases "Like the Plague"

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Future Health Care Providers Learn to Avoid Infectious Diseases “Like the Plague”

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Fourteen freshmen at Illinois Wesleyan University are using their required freshman writing course to learn about one of the most important news topics of today: plagues.

“Impending Plagues: Emergence, Detection, and Response” includes curriculum about infectious diseases and viruses such as Mad Cow Disease, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Ebola, West Nile Virus, HIV/AIDS, anthrax and smallpox in relation to bio-terrorism, and influenza. Such diseases have posed a health risk to the world population; some have caused many deaths.

But what are the specific risks of plagues? The class addresses how these plagues are a threat, how they emerge, are detected, and the worldwide response to each one. “I think it is a very important topic...we will see more before we see less of infectious diseases,” said Susan Swanlund, assistant professor of nursing at Illinois Wesleyan and instructor of the course.

According to Swanlund, soon after the introduction of widespread antibiotic use in the 1950s, many scientists, and even one United States Surgeon General, wrote that research on infectious diseases was not very necessary. However, in the last couple decades, the need for increased knowledge concerning plagues has become apparent. Since threats of bio-terrorism emerged, “almost everyone in health care is being trained in bio-terrorism,” she said.

Recently, “60 Minutes II,” the Associated Press, and other media have alerted the public to epidemics. The bird flu epidemic has taken the lives of millions of chickens and at least 21 humans so far in seven Asian nations and has even been found in chickens in Texas. The most foreboding concern with the bird flu is that a “catastrophe that [public health experts] say is among the worst imaginable, a global outbreak of an entirely new form of the human flu” will occur, according to an article that appeared in the Jan. 25, 2004, edition of *The Pantagraph*, “Scientists fear bird flu.”

The students in Swanlund’s class will look at how widespread antibiotic misuse caused influenza and other viruses to grow as a health threat, as well as other factors in the increase of infectious diseases, such as increased global travel, urbanization, population growth, and many others. They are learning what average citizens can do to prevent outbreaks so they will be able to educate others through their future careers in health care.

The students will visit the BroMenn Regional Medical Center in Normal to view emergency decontamination showers and interact with two health care professionals regarding bio-terrorism and smallpox on March 29, 2004, as a part of this learning process.

Illinois Wesleyan student Erin Garibaldi, a freshman from Roselle, Ill., said that she chose to take “Impending Plagues” because “it explains every aspect of different diseases. I was surprised to learn how quickly diseases can spread and how dangerous they are...you are never sure when an outbreak can happen or where. For that reason people should be educated about the symptoms and get medical help immediately” to prevent an outbreak.

Swanlund agrees that education and research are the keys to preventing the spread of plagues. “A class like this is a real eye opener. One phrase I hope my students remember is: ‘Chance favors the prepared mind.’ If your mind is prepared, you’ll produce a better outcome.”

For more information on the prevention of infectious diseases, visit the CDC Web site, www.cdc.gov. Or, if you would like to visit an “Impending Plagues” class or set up an interview, please contact Erin Wetherille or Sherry Wallace at 309/556-3181.