



The New Contingency Plan – Health Related Emergencies

*Integrating
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With the recent global outbreak of SARS, companies are being forced to reevaluate their thinking in regards to contingency planning and the importance of anticipating Healthcare Related Emergencies (HREs). A company should always be able to mitigate the potential damage and financial loss resulting from an unforeseen emergency or catastrophe. When an emergency occurs, a company can respond more effectively if a contingency plan is already in place. Most companies view contingency planning solely as a tool to prevent operational shutdowns as a result of technological, natural, or economic disasters. Unfortunately, few consider the impact of HREs.

The benefits of developing an HRE contingency plan are numerous; however, the main goals of such initiatives are to ensure business continuity, the reduction of risk to employees and their dependents, maintaining productivity as well as minimizing the possibility of litigation.

The process of developing a contingency plan actually forces people to focus on the most critical aspects of the business. Determining protocol is an important first step when developing a contingency plan. A defined team, with decision-making authority, will help the company answer such questions as:

- Who should go home and who can stay at work?
- What level of short and long-term disability insurance is acceptable?
- How would an HRE affect your current benefit and/or insurance costs?
- Who will have the authority to make these decisions?
- How will the company keep operating should an emergency occur?

In developing an HRE contingency plan, a company should establish a working group, including representatives from all key areas in the organization. This working group should include human resources, IT, corporate counsel, senior management and union representatives, if applicable. Key activities and issues of this working group should include:

- A review of any existing contingency or emergency plans to identify and address gaps and overlaps.
- Identification or establishment of plans to deal with quarantined employees.
- Action steps to respond to a member of an employee's family being quarantined.
- Policies concerning the company's national and international travel policies, in the event of health related travel advisories.
- Plans for employee access to resources during an emergency.

- Plans for emergency on-site health screening clinics or external medical support services.

A second step in developing an HRE contingency plan involves the establishment of internal contacts to receive initial health and other information, for distribution to employees. Employees should be educated about company policies and procedures, and a communication plan should be developed and implemented. During an emergency, daily communication with employees is essential. An internal system for communicating information facilitates the effective and efficient distribution of information during a health related disaster.

As a third step, an off-site 'clean team' should be established, operating separately from the primary business location. This team of individuals would operate essential business activities, allowing the company to continue functioning, should a portion of the regular workforce be unable to continue regular business duties.

Protecting the workplace from HREs is not only beneficial in terms of ensuring financial and operational stability; it is a legal requirement for conducting business. The provincial and territorial legislation sets out the rights and duties of all parties in the workplace. Its main purpose is to protect workers against health and safety hazards on the job. The legislation establishes procedures for dealing with workplace hazards, and it provides for enforcement of the law where compliance has not been achieved voluntarily.

Nearly every workplace is covered by the legislation. Only those workplaces under federal jurisdiction (banks, post offices, airlines, etc.), farming operations and work done in private residence are exempt from the legislation. Organizations are required to provide a safe working environment for their employees. Employees can refuse to work in an unsafe environment.

In addition, Human Rights legislation prohibits discrimination based on disability including diseases and those individuals under quarantine for a specific condition – regardless if symptoms are present or if the condition has been diagnosed.

Differential treatment of employees for reasons other than health and safety precautions is also prohibited. For example, with the SARS outbreak, if an employer decided to allow individuals who had traveled to Asia back into their organization, but did not allow those of Asian descent, this would be seen as discriminatory. Engaging in any prohibited conduct can lead to a complaint to the appropriate Human Rights Commission.

While the recent SARS epidemic received immense media coverage and widespread concern, it should not be viewed as an isolated occurrence. Each year, Canadians are exposed to numerous diseases that could adversely effect the operations of any given business. With increasing trade, travel, and migration between countries, it is not surprising that Canada is being exposed to more and more epidemics.

AVERAGE ANNUAL CANADIAN CASES AND DEATHS FROM COMMUNICABLE DISEASES VS. SARS AND WEST NILE VIRUS

Disease	Annual Cases	Annual Deaths (Approx.)
Pneumonia & Influenza	45,250	8,000
Salmonella	9,000	405
Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)¹	318	27
West Nile Virus²	362	11
Tuberculosis (TB)	2,000	0
Meningitis	65	0

1. Based on 2003 data only as at May 27, 2003
2. Based on 2002 data only

(Source: Health Canada, Statistics Canada and World Health Organization)

In this century alone, global flu pandemics have occurred in 1918, 1957 and 1968 with statistical models predicting a similar epidemic occurring in the next 5 to 10 years. In such an event, if a vaccine were not available, a model devised by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, predicts that Canada would see 9,000 to 51,000 deaths.

Contingency planning, and the development of a meaningful HRE policy, are important first steps in any organization’s response to an emergency health situation and will provide the tools necessary to maintain business function during this period. Proactive planning will not only reduce the impact of a future HRE on your financial and operational performance, but also ensure that your organization is operating in compliance with Canadian health and safety legislation.

For further information, please contact us at **info@morneausobeco.com**.

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