

Flu Season Strikes Early And Hard

BY MIKE STOBBE
AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK — From the Rocky Mountains to New England, hospitals are swamped with people with flu symptoms. Some medical centers are turning away visitors or making them wear face masks, and one Pennsylvania hospital set up a tent outside its ER to deal with the feverish patients.

Flu season in the U.S. has struck early and, in many places, hard.

While flu normally doesn't blanket the country until late January or February, it is already widespread in more than 40 states, with about 30 of them reporting some major hotspots. On Thursday, health officials blamed the flu for the deaths of 20 children so far.

Whether this will be considered a bad season by the time it has run its course in the spring remains to be seen.

"Those of us with gray hair have seen worse," said Dr. William Schaffner, a flu expert at Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

The evidence so far points to a moderate season, Schaffner and others say. It looks bad in part because last year was unusually mild and because the main strain of influenza circulating

this year tends to make people sicker and really lay them low.

David Smythe of New York City saw it happen to his 50-year-old girlfriend, who has been knocked out for about two weeks. "She's been in bed. She can't even get up," he said.

Also, the flu's early arrival coincided with spikes in a variety of other viruses, including a childhood malady that mimics flu and a new norovirus that causes vomiting and diarrhea, or what is commonly known as "stomach flu." So what people are calling the flu may, in fact, be something else.

"There may be more of an overlap than we normally see," said Dr. Joseph Bresee, who tracks the flu for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Most people don't undergo lab tests to confirm flu, and the symptoms are so similar that it can be hard to distinguish flu from other viruses, or even a cold. Over the holidays, 250 people were sickened at a Mormon missionary training center in Utah, but the culprit turned out to be a norovirus, not the flu.

Flu is a major contributor, though, to what's going on.

"I'd say 75 percent," said Dr. Dan Surdam, head of the emergency department at Cheyenne

Regional Medical Center, Wyoming's largest hospital. The 17-bed emergency room saw its busiest day ever last week, with 166 visitors.

The early onslaught has resulted in a spike in hospitalizations. To deal with the influx and protect other patients from getting sick, hospitals are restricting visits from children, requiring family members to wear masks and banning anyone with flu symptoms from maternity wards.

One hospital in Allentown, Pa., set up a tent this week for a steady stream of patients with flu symptoms. But so far "what we're seeing is a typical flu season," said Terry Burger, director of infection control and prevention for the hospital, Lehigh Valley Hospital-Cedar Crest.

On Wednesday, Boston declared a public health emergency, with the city's hospitals counting about 1,500 emergency room visits since December by people with flu-like symptoms.

All the flu activity has led some to question whether this year's flu shot is working. While health officials are still analyzing the vaccine, early indications are that it's about 60 percent effective, which is in line with what's been seen in other years.

Obama Nominates Lew To Lead Treasury

BY JIM KUHNHENN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama nominated White House chief of staff Jack Lew to be treasury secretary Thursday, declaring his complete trust in an aide with three decades of Washington experience in economic policy and a penchant for shunning the limelight.

"He is a low-key guy who prefers to surround himself with policy experts rather than television cameras," Obama said.

Obama announced his nomination in the ornate White House East Room, flanked by Lew and outgoing Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner. The two men and their backgrounds illustrate the nation's changing economic landscape. Geithner is a longtime banking specialist with the Treasury and the Federal Reserve who took office in 2009 at the height of the nation's financial crisis. Lew has been a budget expert as the government struggled with its debt and deficit challenges.

Obama heaped praise on Geithner for addressing the Wall Street meltdown and shepherding an overhaul of financial regulations through Congress.

"When the history books are written, Tim Geithner is going to go down as one of our finest secretaries of the treasury."



Jacob Jackson, 15, hugs his mother Mary Jackson, 36, and grandmother Sandy Jackson, 57, looks on after being safely reunited at Taft Union High School in Kern County, California, on Thursday, January 10, 2013, after a student opened fire in a classroom.

Student Shot At Calif. High School

BY TRACIE CONE
Associated Press

TAFT, Calif. — A 16-year-old student armed with a shotgun walked into class in a rural California high school on Thursday and shot one student, fired at another and missed, and then was talked into surrendering by a teacher and another staff member, officials said.

The teen victim was in critical but stable condition, Kern County Sheriff Donny Youngblood told a press conference. The sheriff said the teacher at Taft Union High School suffered a minor pellet wound to the head and declined treatment.

The gunman had as many as 20 rounds of ammunition in his pocket, the sheriff said.

When the shots were fired, the teacher tried to get the more than two dozen students out a back door and also engaged the shooter in conversation to dis-

tract him, Youngblood said. A campus supervisor responding to a call of shots fired also began talking to the gunman.

"They talked him into putting that shotgun down. He in fact told the teacher, 'I don't want to shoot you,' and named the person that he wanted to shoot," Youngblood said.

"The heroics of these two people goes without saying. ... They could have just as easily ... tried to get out of the classroom and left students and they didn't," the sheriff said. "They knew not to let him leave the classroom with that shotgun."

The shooter didn't show up for first period then interrupted the class of 28 students.

Investigators had not yet had a chance to interview the student and so had no immediate word on a motive or whether the attacker had a previous disciplinary record. Nor did they know where he got the shotgun.

The wounded student was flown to a hospital in Bakersfield. Officials said a female student was hospitalized with possible hearing damage because the shotgun was fired close to her ear, and another girl received minor injuries during the scramble to flee when she fell over a table.

Officials said there's usually an armed officer on campus, but the person wasn't there because he was snowed in. Taft police officers arrived within 60 seconds of first reports.

The shooting occurred at the school in Taft, a community of fewer than 10,000 people amid oil and natural gas production fields about 120 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

The attack came less than a month after a gunman massacred 20 children and six women at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., then killed himself.

Thune

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to mandatory spending, 34 percent to discretionary spending and 7 percent to interest.

The budget's \$2.435 trillion in revenues covers only the mandatory spending and interest, the senator said. The mandatory spending is growing at two to three times the rate of inflation.

Social Security has been in a cash deficit for the past two years, Thune said.

"There is no Social Security trust fund; it's just a bunch of IOUs," he said. "Saying it's solvent to 2033 doesn't mean anything. It's all borrowed money. There is no security in the Social Security trust fund. As the dollars come into the door, it's being spent."

In addition, Medicare will find itself insolvent by 2024 without any reforms, he said.

Washington may be forced into looking at a package of tax, Medicare and Medicaid reforms as well as reprioritizing government programs, he said.

President Barack Obama will ask Congress to increase the debt limit in two months, which looms as the next battleground over taxes and spending, Thune said.

"We believe it should trigger a debate," he said. "During the last 27 years, any significant deficit reduction has been linked to the debt limit debate."

FALLING OFF THE CLIFF?

The spectacle of the "fiscal cliff" debate and New Year's Eve

meeting of Congress showed the sharp divide over the budget and government spending, Thune said.

The senator said he didn't like the package but defended his vote in favor of it. The lack of an agreement would have affected 400,000 South Dakota taxpayers, he said.

"There was a lot of criticism of the deal. But without it, there would have been a massive increase for all taxpayers," he said. "This (package) protects 99 percent of South Dakota taxpayers and 98 percent of our businesses. Given the choices, I voted for it."

Without passage of the "fiscal cliff" agreement by Jan. 1, the nation would have seen a \$4.5 trillion tax increase over the next decade, Thune said.

The lack of a deal would also have affected investments and families, the senator said. It also would have triggered changes in the estate tax affecting about half of South Dakota's farms, he said.

"If there had been raises in the death tax, a lot of farmers and ranchers would have to be sold to satisfy the IRS," he said. "It would have been devastating for the inter-generational transfer of farms and ranches."

According to the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO), the nation's economy would have returned to a jobless rate of about 9 percent, Thune said. The economy would have seen a recession during the first half of 2013, along with higher government spending with much of it for safety nets such as food stamps.

Raising taxes on the upper 2 percent of the nation's incomes is not the solution, Thune said. "We need to decrease spending

and reform entitlements," he said.

The U.S. Senate has failed to pass a formal budget since 2009, Thune said. In the meantime, the federal deficit has exceeded \$1 trillion for four years in a row.

"Without a budget, it's hard to get our runaway debt under control," he said.

DEALING WITH DEBT

For historical perspective, Thune said the first 43 presidents over 232 years accumulated a \$6.3 trillion debt. During the last four years, the federal government has amassed a \$5.3 trillion debt, he said.

How much is \$1 trillion? Thune offered a couple of examples.

"If you had \$100 bills stacked one on top of the other, it would be 689 miles high. Or if you laid them end to end, it would be like driving from Watertown to Denver, which is 690 miles," he said.

"Or if you started a business on the day that Jesus was born, and lost \$1 million a day, it would be 728 more years before you reached \$1 trillion."

The United States currently has about the same debt as its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), putting it on a par with European nations facing similar financial woes, Thune said.

"You have to go back to the end of World War II to find where your (U.S. federal) debt to GDP is one-to-one," he said.

Despite the federal spending, Thune said he didn't support a government shutdown.

The senator took questions from the audience on a variety of topics including banking regulations, crop insurance, health care

Bombings Kill 115 People In Pakistan

QUETTA, Pakistan (AP) — A series of bombings in different parts of Pakistan killed 115 people on Thursday, including 81 who died in a sectarian attack on a bustling billiard hall in the southwest city of Quetta, officials said.

The blasts punctuated one of the deadliest days in recent years in Pakistan, where the government faces a bloody insurgency by Taliban militants in the northwest and Baluch militants in the southwest.

The country is also home to many enemies of the U.S. that Washington has frequently targeted with drone attacks. A U.S. missile strike Thursday killed five suspected militants in the seventh such attack in two weeks, Pakistani intelligence officials said.

The billiard hall in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan province, was hit by twin blasts about 5 minutes apart on Thursday night, killing 81 people and wounding more than 120 others, said senior police officer Zubair Mehmood.

The billiard hall was located in an area dominated by Shiite Muslims, and most of the dead and wounded were from the minority sect, said another police officer, Mohammed Murtaza. Many of the people who rushed to the scene after the first blast and were hit by the second bomb, which caused the roof of the building to collapse, he said.

3 Kurdish Activists Killed In Paris

PARIS (AP) — Three Kurdish activists were shot dead in what authorities called an "execution" in central Paris, prompting speculation that the long-running conflict between insurgents from the minority group and Turkey was playing out on French shores.

The slayings came as Turkey was holding peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers Party, which seeks self-rule for Kurds in the country's southeast, to try to persuade it to disarm. The conflict between the group, known as the PKK, and the Turkish government has claimed tens of thousands of lives since 1984.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said at a news conference in Senegal on Thursday that his country was determined to press ahead with the talks despite the events in Paris, which he suggested could be the result of internal strife or an act to sabotage the talks. The PKK does have a history of internal killings. But many Kurdish activists and militants were also victims of extra-judicial killings blamed on Turkish government forces in the 1990s.

Initial reports were contradictory but pointed to a grisly crime scene. One Kurdish organization said the door of the building where the women were found just after midnight was smeared with blood, that two of the women were shot in the neck and one in the stomach and that the killer used a silencer. French radio reported that all three were shot in the head.

The killings set off a round of accusations, with each side accusing the other of being behind the deaths. Police tried to contain hundreds of Kurds who flocked to the building in eastern Paris where the bodies were found Thursday, many blaming Turkey and calling the deaths a "political assassination."

Drug companies Partner With Top Universities

ST. LOUIS (AP) — In their quest for the next big drug discovery, pharmaceutical companies are increasingly teaming up with some of the nation's top universities, recruiting campus scientists as partners and offering schools multimillion-dollar deals to work on experimental drugs in development.

Big Pharma has long sought to profit from academia's innovations in more limited arrangements. Now the two sides are often joining forces as equals. But the drug makers' aggressive pursuit of university research has drawn the ire of academic purists who question whether the partnerships put profits ahead of, or on equal footing with, science for science's sake.

"What it does is to blur the boundaries between academic medical centers and investor-owned companies," said Dr. Marcia Angell, former editor-in-chief of the New England Journal of Medicine and a prominent critic of the pharmaceutical industry's new coziness with major campuses.

Pfizer Inc., Astra Zeneca PLC and Eli Lilly and Co. are among the major international drug companies signing agreements with schools such as New York University, Harvard and the University of California at San Francisco.

Driving the change is the expiration of patents for such lucrative name-brand drugs as Seroquel, Lipitor and Protonix, which industry observers say accounted for nearly \$36 billion in U.S. sales in 2011 and 2012. More than ever, drug makers need new revenue to replace diminished profits from drugs that now have generic rivals.

Syrian Rebels Seize Parts Of Strategic Air Base

BEIRUT (AP) — Hundreds of Islamic militants fighting to topple Syrian President Bashar Assad seized parts of a strategic northwestern air base Thursday after weeks of battling government troops for control of the sprawling facility.

At stake is the biggest field for helicopters used to bomb rebel-held areas in the north and deliver supplies for regime forces.

Opposition fighters and activists said rebels broke into Taftanaz air base in the northern Idlib province Wednesday night and by Thursday had seized control of more than half of it. Intense battles were still raging, and one activist said rebels had suffered losses.

On Thursday evening, an activist near Taftanaz said the government bombed the air base from warplanes in a desperate attempt to push back rebels who seized several helicopters. The account from the activist, who requested anonymity out of fear of reprisals, could not immediately be confirmed.

An amateur video posted by activists online showed smoke rising from behind helicopters parked at the Taftanaz tarmac, and a narrator said it was the result of an airstrike. The video appeared consistent with Associated Press reporting.

Meanwhile, Iran's official IRNA news agency said 48 former captives held for more than five months returned on Thursday to Tehran after being freed by Syrian rebels in the first major prisoner swap of the civil war.

The rebel attack on the Taftanaz base is part of a wider attempt to chip away at the Syrian regime's air supremacy, which poses the biggest obstacle to the opposition fighters' advances.

As its control of large swaths of territory has slipped over the past year, the government has increasingly relied on its warplanes and helicopters to strike rebel-held areas.

The rebels have been besieging Taftanaz for months and launched an offensive to take the base in early November.

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