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Circular letter No.2956  
8 May 2009

To: All IMO Members  
United Nations and Specialized Agencies  
Intergovernmental Organizations  
Non-governmental Organizations in Consultative Status

Subject: **Influenza A(H1N1) Virus**

### **Introduction**

- 1 The purpose of this circular letter is to provide:
  - .1 guidance, based on recommendations developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) related to the outbreak of the influenza A(H1N1), with a view to minimizing any risks that may present themselves to passengers, seafarers and the public at large and ensuring that the maritime community is fully aware of the precautions that may be taken; and
  - .2 information for participants to IMO meetings on measures they are advised to take, prior to travel.

### **Background**

2 As at 29 April 2009, after considering epidemiological data coming from the most affected countries, WHO raised the global influenza pandemic alert level to Phase 5. Phase 5 is characterized by human-to-human spread of the virus with community level infection in at least two countries in one WHO region. These developments indicated a rapid progression of the H1N1 outbreak. Accordingly, the United Nations system has activated its pandemic preparedness response plans, and is making every effort to ensure that risk is minimized, while maintaining critical business functions.

### **General protection**

3<sup>2</sup> Influenza A(H1N1) is a respiratory disease caused by type A influenza viruses that cause regular outbreaks in pigs. People do not normally get this influenza, but human infections can and do happen. The H1N1 virus is contagious and is spreading from human to human. However, at this time, it not known how easily the virus spreads between people. WHO is not recommending travel restrictions related to the outbreak of the influenza A(H1N1) virus. Today, global travel is commonplace and large numbers of people move around the world for business and leisure. Limiting travel and imposing travel restrictions would have very little effect on stopping the virus from spreading, but would be highly disruptive to the global community.

3.1 The symptoms of H1N1 influenza in people are similar to the symptoms of regular human influenza and include: fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people have reported diarrhoea and vomiting associated with H1N1 influenza. In the past, severe illness (pneumonia and respiratory failure) and deaths have been reported with H1N1 influenza infection in people. Like seasonal influenza, H1N1 influenza may cause a worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions.

3.2 In order to avoid getting influenza, excellent hygiene is the most important and appropriate way to protect oneself and others. It is also important to try to stay in good general health, get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious food.

3.3 WHO recommends the use of oseltamivir (Tamiflu) or zanamivir (Relenza) for the treatment and/or prevention of infection through H1N1 viruses.

3.4 People with H1N1 influenza should be considered potentially contagious as long as they are symptomatic and will remain contagious for up to 7 days following illness onset. Children, especially younger children, might potentially be contagious for longer periods.

3.5 There is no vaccine presently available to protect against the H1N1 influenza virus. The actions listed in paragraph 3.2 can help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses like influenza. The following instructions will assist in protecting health:

- cover nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and disposing of it after use;
- wash hands often with soap and water, especially after coughing or sneezing. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective;
- avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth, as germs spread this way;
- try to avoid close contact with sick people; and
- if symptoms develop, isolate completely and seek medical advice immediately.

3.6 Member States and all involved in the maritime industry are encouraged to consult the WHO website (<http://www.who.int/en/>) at regular intervals in order to keep abreast of any updated information on this disease, and to promulgate relevant WHO advice to passengers, seafarers and the maritime community, as appropriate.

### **Meeting participants**

4 Member States are requested to ensure that the following measures are brought to the attention of participants planning to attend meetings at IMO Headquarters.

4.1 Participants who have recently visited one of the countries or areas where human cases of H1N1 influenza have been identified, should monitor their health closely for seven days after their visit to the affected area. It is not necessary to remain isolated from other people as long as no symptoms develop. If during this period the participant develops a feverish illness accompanied by a sore throat, headache and muscle aches they should not attend meetings, should avoid close contact with other persons, and contact a physician by phone and arrange to be seen, or seek advice from the IMO Medical Unit (tel: 020 7463 4012).

### **Pandemic arrangements**

5 Should the situation change and the influenza alert level be raised to Phase 6 by WHO (which means that there is an increased and sustained transmission of the virus in the general population), the following measures would be amongst those which **may need to be taken** by the Secretariat:

- .1 to suspend all IMO meetings;
- .2 to suspend all staff duty and home leave travel;
- .3 with the exception of a core group of staff of not more than 20, plus some contractors who would remain at IMO, staff would be instructed to work from home;
- .4 information would be promulgated to staff immediately via email, intranet and through a cascading system; and
- .5 staff would be instructed to remain at home and avoid contact with other people as far as possible, until advised differently.

6 Member Governments and international organizations concerned are requested to bring this circular to the attention of all concerned and all meeting participants are encouraged to consult the WHO website frequently in order to be aware of the latest information regarding this disease, at <http://www.who.int/en/>.

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