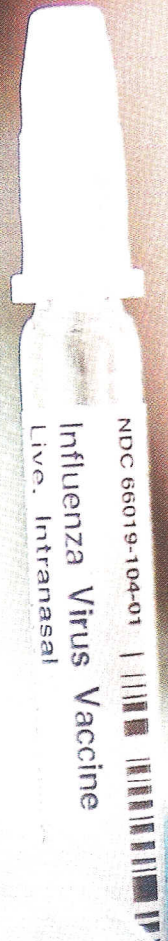


Use of the FluMist nasal spray vaccine — a godsend for folks who fear needles — put a dent in the absentee rate of vaccinated students in Washington County Public Schools. (inset) During the October peak of the 1918 Spanish Flu outbreak, festivities at the Hagerstown Fair — shown in this postcard circa 1912 — were cancelled in an effort to control the virus.

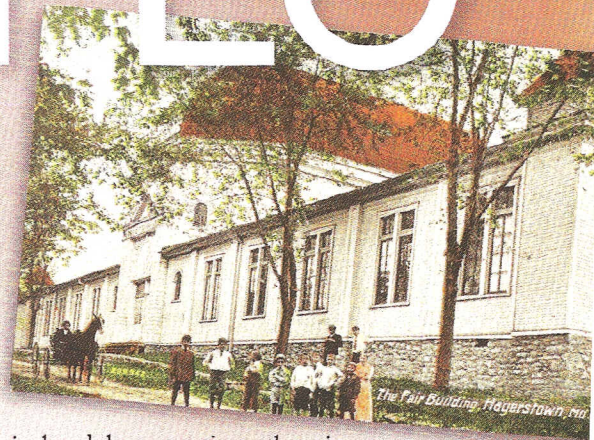


# KEEPING A WATCHFUL Eye on the FLU

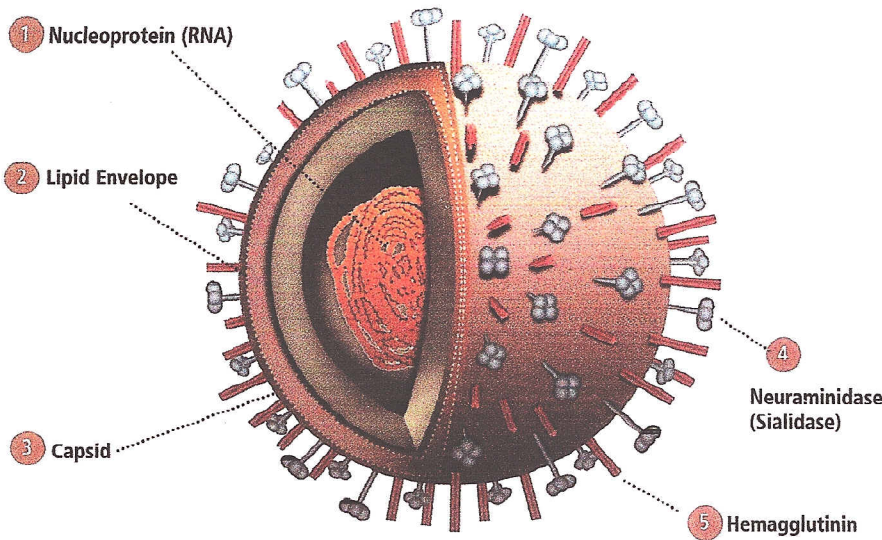
**LOCAL HEALTH OFFICIALS KEEP CLOSE TABS ON INFLUENZA STRAINS AND DEVELOP EMERGENCY PLANS TO KEEP HISTORY FROM REPEATING ITSELF.**

by James Rada Jr.  
photos by Erick Gibson

The home in the mountains of Washington County was isolated, but sometimes there is no way to stop an unfriendly visitor from finding you. The few neighbors in the area began to suspect trouble when they noticed the doors and windows to the house remained open at all hours in October 1918. A group of men finally decided to investigate the problem. They approached the house and cautiously entered. “They heard a moan from upstairs. On a bed, unconscious and very ill, they found the mother, and the father was in the hall on a cot. In another room lay a child, raving ill ...” The family described in that *Hagerstown Daily Mail* story had been hit with influenza. The Spanish Flu,



**INFLUENZA VIRUS ANATOMY**



which was a version of Avian Flu, created an epidemic that killed 157 people in Washington County in 1918 in a little more than a month, and there were 1,688 reported cases among the estimated population of 57,500. The Spanish Flu killed more Americans than World War I, which was winding down at the same time the flu struck. Spanish Flu is the extreme of what the flu can do to a population. Most people are more familiar with the coughing and aching that accompanies the seasonal flu. “The bottom line is that influenza is dangerous, whether it’s the common seasonal flu or a more severe pandemic flu,” says Washington County Health Officer Earl Stoner.

Influenza, or flu, is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by the influenza virus. The virus spreads through the air when people cough. It can also spread by direct contact with an infected person. Symptoms — which tend to begin one to four days after a person is infected — might include chills, fever, coughing, headaches, muscle aches, sore throat, runny nose and fatigue. Although not considered a deadly disease, common seasonal flu can lead to serious complications like pneumonia, bronchitis, high fever and, in children, seizures. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, flu-related complications kill about 36,000 people, mostly the elderly, each year in the United States.

**KEEPING THE FLU AT BAY**

Preventing the flu essentially boils down to not coming in contact with the virus. In addition to avoiding contact with infected individuals, one of the best ways to avoid getting sick is to wash your hands thoroughly. “Wash your hands. That’s the number one thing you can do to prevent the spread of germs,” Earl says. Vaccinations also reduce the likelihood of catching the flu, and are recommended for those with weaker immune systems — especially children and the elderly. Because the flu virus can mutate rapidly, new vaccines are developed and administered each year to combat the newest strains.

The local health department sponsors flu vaccination clinics for the general

SEASONAL FLU	PANDEMIC FLU
Outbreaks follow predictable seasonal patterns; occurs annually, usually in winter, in temperate climates	Occurs rarely (three times in 20th century; last in 1968)
Usually some immunity built up from previous exposure	No previous exposure; little or no pre-existing immunity
Healthy adults usually not at risk for serious complications; the very young, the elderly and those with certain underlying health conditions are at increased risk for serious complications	Healthy people may be at increased risk for serious complications
Health systems can usually meet public and patient needs	Health systems may be overwhelmed
Vaccine developed based on known flu strains and available for annual flu season	Vaccine probably would not be available in the early stages of a pandemic
Adequate supplies of antivirals are usually available	Effective antivirals may be in limited supply
Average U.S. deaths approximately 36,000 per year	Number of deaths could be quite high (e.g., U.S. 1918 death toll approximately 675,000)
Symptoms: fever, cough, runny nose, muscle pain. Deaths often caused by complications, such as pneumonia	Symptoms may be more severe and complications more frequent
Generally causes modest impact on society (e.g., some school closings, encouragement of people who are sick to stay home)	May cause major impact on society (e.g. widespread restrictions on travel, closings of schools and businesses, cancellation of large public gatherings)
Manageable impact on domestic and world economy	Potential for severe impact on domestic and world economy

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Washington County Health Officer Earl Stoner leads a department that takes an aggressive approach to combating the flu virus.

public during the flu season at venues such as the Elks Lodge, North Hagerstown High School and South Hagerstown High School. In addition, the health department has vaccinated elementary school students with the FluMist nasal spray vaccine — a relatively new vaccine which uses a live virus that is sprayed into the nose. (Needle-phobics don't fear this form of vaccine as much.) Once a person receives a vaccination, it takes about two weeks to develop immunity, which can last up to a year, according to the CDC.

The preliminary results from using the FluMist vaccine on nearly 5,000 Washington County schoolchildren last year have been promising. "The school health supervisor has noticed a decrease in absenteeism," says Elizabeth Nuckles, former communicable disease program manager with the health department.

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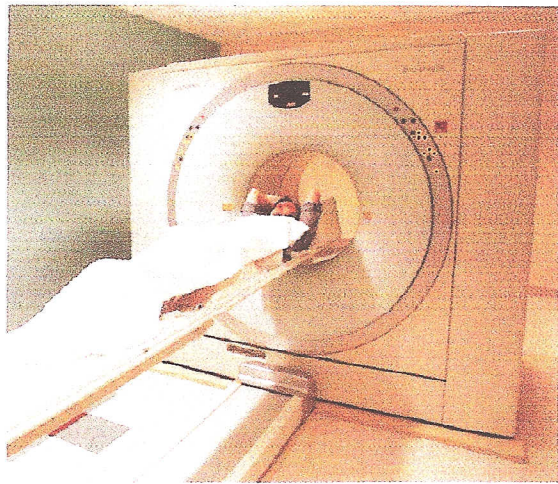
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Seasonal flu shots can reduce the risk of flu-related complications such as pneumonia.

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Other counties have seen similar decreases. After the end of the 2005–06 flu season, Carroll County, Md., researchers studied the public school system there to see if FluMist vaccinations had an effect on absenteeism among the elementary school children. The results showed that while absenteeism increased among all students, it was three times higher among students who hadn't received the vaccination.

Besides students, the elderly, pregnant women, individuals with weakened immune systems and those with long-term health problems like heart disease, lung disease and asthma should also be vaccinated for the seasonal flu. In a 2003 study of 260,000 senior citizens, patients who got their flu shots spent a third less time in hospitals for pneumonia — a common complication of the flu. "We make the senior sites available to the health department and go along with their recommendations," says Susan MacDonald, executive director of the Washington County Commission on Aging. She notes that the commission offers support services, such as making sure seniors who need transportation to a clinic get it.

### PREPARING FOR THE WORST

While health officials are able to keep up with yearly mutations of the common flu virus, mutations in potential pandemic flu strains might not be as easily controlled. The H5N1 flu



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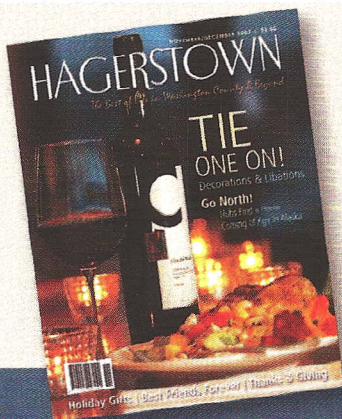
photo: Dan Frankforter

When the Spanish flu epidemic was at its worst, the club house of the Hagerstown Country Club, shown here circa 1950, was converted to a hospital by the Western Maryland Railway Co.

strain — commonly known as pandemic Avian Flu, although most flu viruses are avian in nature — is a deadly flu strain that has, for the most part, remained in birds. The worry is that it will mutate enough to be transmitted to humans. “The flu virus mutates very quickly,” Earl says. “It can be difficult to get your hands around and contain. If H5N1 ever makes the leap to infecting the human population, it could be a major health crisis.”

The Spanish Flu was one such mutation. It killed 675,000 U.S. residents in 1918 and an estimated 40 million people worldwide. Health officials fear the H5N1 flu can become a pandemic similar to the Spanish Flu if it mutates enough to become easily transmittable between birds and humans. “The H5N1 flu strain is very complex,” Earl says. “It can spread very, very rapidly — and that’s what worries us the most.”

The health department estimates that if a Spanish Flu-like pandemic were to hit the county, there would be about 42,570 cases that required 4,680 hospitalizations. It is also estimated that 900 people would die from the flu. In preparation for the possibility of such a health crisis, the health department is developing an emergency plan that includes five vaccination sites around the county. The entire county could be vaccinated in five days after a vaccine was developed — which could take six to 12 months — with 5,900 people



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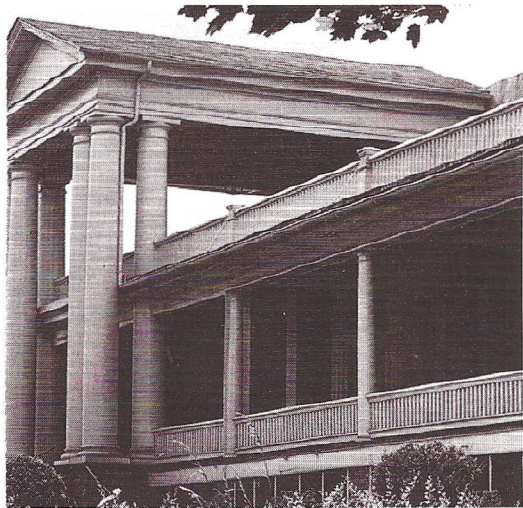
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vaccinated at each site per day.

The public got a glimpse of how county agencies might handle an epidemic situation in October 2006. Officials quarantined 16 individuals on Hagerstown's Franklin Street who were showing flu-like symptoms. The ailing Hagerstonians were quarantined in yellow tents near their homes while health officials investigated the cause of their illness. Luckily, in that case, it was a false alarm. But it showed that county and city emergency service personnel were ready to deal with a problem — and they plan to be ready should it be a real epidemic the next time. ♥

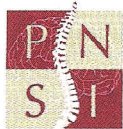
*Special thanks to the Western Maryland Room for use of the historical photos in this article.*

## Preventing the **FLU**

The flu virus is spread by coughing and sneezing, and can be picked up by touching an object contaminated with the virus. To help reduce your chances of catching the flu this season, follow these simple steps:

- Clean your hands often.
- Cover your cough with a tissue or your arm.
- Routinely clean and disinfect surfaces.
- Get immunized.
- Keep your distance in crowds.

**If you get sick, stay home so you don't infect others.**



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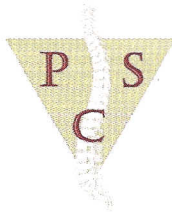
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