

Virus can stay on doorknobs for up to 2 days

By HOWARD MOZEL
Special to The Champion

Dwarfed by a projected image of a cluster of influenza viruses, Halton Region Associate Medical Officer of Health Dr. Monir Taha recently gave attendees of a forum on business continuity an up-close glimpse of the disease that, while microscopic in size, could have huge ramifications for life as we know it.

"This is the enemy," he said, referring to the gray, globular bundle.

This foe — the "flu," as it's commonly known — is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that are spread from person to person primarily through the coughing and sneezing of those infected.

The typical incubation period is one to four days, with an average of two days. Adults can be infectious from the day before symptoms begin through approximately five days after the illness' onset. Its effects can result a few missed workdays to hospitalization and even death. The young and the old are especially susceptible.

By some estimates, the 1918 "Spanish" flu — which emerged from the ashes of the First World War — wiped out 40 million people around the world.

"The death rate from the Spanish flu soared beyond what anyone could have imagined," said Dr. Taha.

Today, in an age when viruses migrate between continents at the speed of air travel instead of with troop ships returning home from war, co-operative global vigilance is vital to identifying and containing the disease. If not, a "pandemic" — disease that occurs



Photo by BARRIE ERSKINE

Wayne Gould, emergency planning co-ordinator for Halton Region, speaks at the pandemic workshop.

over a wide geographic area affecting an exceptionally high proportion of the population — might transpire.

If the bug is particularly virulent, like the 1918 Spanish flu that killed some sufferers in a single day, the impact on societies could prove enormous. Far from engaging in fear mongering, however,

Dr. Taha was simply intent on underscoring the potential for trouble by promoting awareness.

To that end he compared the flu virus to a CD-ROM that can't do anything until it's inserted in a computer — in the disease's case, a host organism. Although flu's major mode of transmission is coughing and sneezing, the virus can survive on surfaces such as doorknobs for 24 to 48 hours. Once infected, sufferers infect an average of three other people.

Flu spreads in what Dr. Taha called waves and since it changes its composition from year to year (called "drift"), flu is adept at fooling human immune systems. As a result, a vaccine will be likely unavailable during the first wave. That said, he maintained awareness of the disease elsewhere in the world makes prevention in North America more effective.

"There is preparation and planning at all levels of government," he said. "Much has been done but there is also much to be done."

Making matters more complicated is what's known as "shift," or a new version of the flu virus that makes the jump from animal to human — like the avian variety that has all experts concerned.

Dr. Taha said this apprehension is partially based on new evidence that the deadly 1918 flu was an avian variety that marked a "completely new shift event" and was "particularly virulent." It not only affected the airways but "wiped out" lung tissues, he said.

This unpredictability was reinforced when Dr. Taha explained that the "normal" death rate from flu in Canada and the U.S. is .01 per cent. During the 1957-58 flu, the death rate was four times this, the 1968-69 flu twice as much. The 1918 Spanish flu was at least 50 times normal.

"What if something worse arrives?" asked Dr. Taha.

Groups to learn to plan for pandemic

As part of Halton Region's commitment to influenza pandemic preparedness, Operation Flu-Phix — a special "tabletop" exercise involving a host of local agencies — will take place Thursday.

The event — held at the Oakville Conference Centre — is not a simulation (like a train derailment scenario, for example) but is instead an opportunity for all relevant stakeholders to communicate face to face, share ideas and identify gaps in planning for a pandemic.

"This will bring everyone together and make connections," said Halton Region Senior Policy Advisor, Emergency Planning, Kathryn Karz, who believes this type of exercise is the first of its kind in the province.

On hand will be more than 170 people representing police, fire and paramedic personnel, plus both Halton school boards, long-term care facilities, daycares, the region's three hospitals, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Community

Safety and Correctional Services.

The volunteer sector will also be represented, from the Red Cross and VON to the Salvation Army and St. John Ambulance.

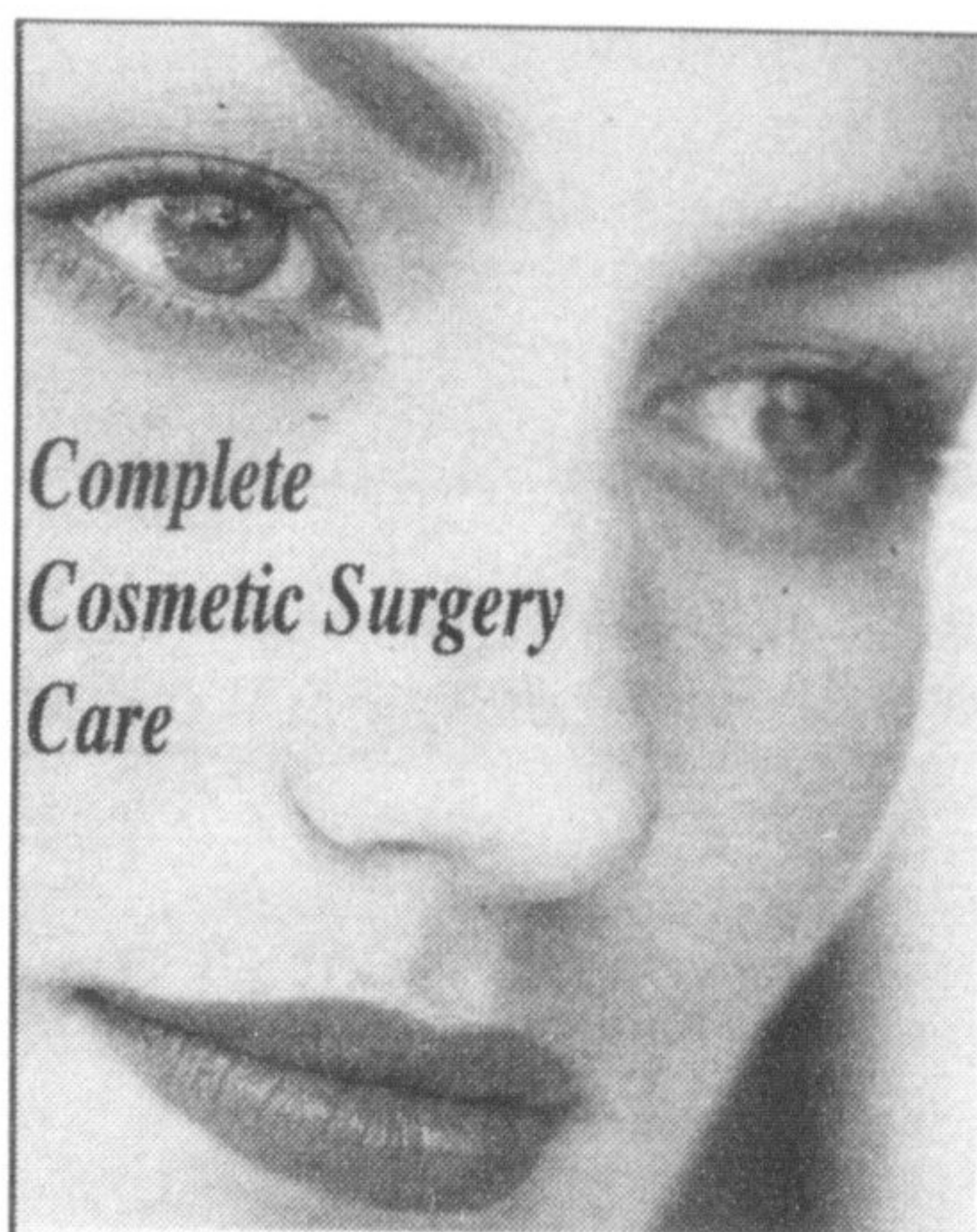
According to Ms Karz, the protracted nature of a flu pandemic will pose so many challenges, it's vital that all stakeholders are on the same page and learn from one another.

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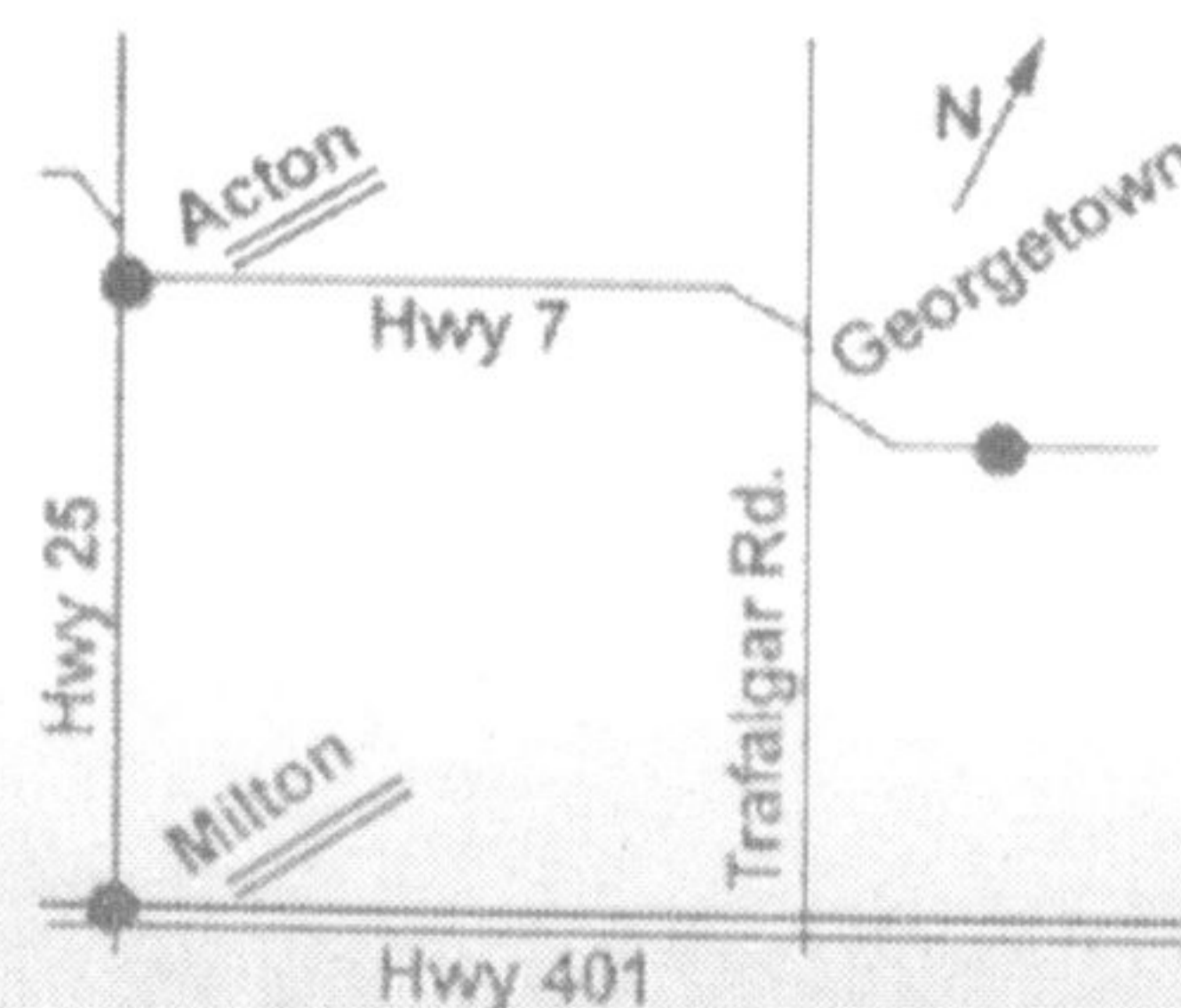
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