Jeffrey Malone

Feature Story Friday – November 13, 2009

Swine Flu Update

Several weeks ago, we at WLOY featured a story about the spread of the H1N1 strain of influenza, characterizing the reaction to the disease as "swine flu hysteria" and reminding members of the Loyola community to keep their sanity in the fight to avoid getting sick. In the time since that story ran, the overall campus paranoia has died down somewhat, but the swine flu story has hardly gone away. On the contrary, it seems to have established a permanent place on the news and people's consciousnesses. As the weather comes down to its colder stage, it is not unreasonable for people to be worried about runny noses, coughs, and achy bodies. But rarely in recent memory has the flu season reached the level of being an ongoing news story.

On November 2, an H1N1 Flu Update was posted on the news section of Loyola's website. This was a follow-up to the update that was posted at the beginning of the semester, as well as all the other messages that have been sent out by the Health Center these past few months. Much of the information provided in the latest update was the same as in the earlier one, with the list of sanitary measures to prevent the spread of swine flu and the recommendation that students who become ill should return home. The new information related in this update was in regards to the number of Loyola students who have been diagnosed with the flu this semester and the progress in the distribution of the H1N1 vaccine. This update hardly came off as alarming, with no news of massive numbers of deaths

among the Loyola population or confirmation that swine flu was, in fact, the most horrible disease ever. Basically, the update conveyed the information that people at Loyola have gotten sick and that swine flu has not gone away. H1N1 is here to stay, at least for the rest of this flu season, but there is no reason yet to construct an elaborate quarantine system. Only simple quarantining for those who are already sick and normal sanitary practices are necessary.

The home pages for Baltimore's ABC and CBS stations both feature updates on H1N1, and stories on the local news on every network relating to the flu have also been frequent. Here at WLOY, a public service announcement recounting the sanitary practices recommended by the Health Center has been running on-air several times a day throughout the semester. Essentially, if you turn on the television, the radio, or the computer, swine flu "news" is basically inescapable. With its presence all over the place, H1N1 updates seem to have entered the realm of business as usual. This is not to say that all "business as usual" news stories are innocuous. If swine flu were killing one hundred people across the country per day, it would be both alarming and routine. The fact that the routine would be so lethal would be part of the alarm. But when an ongoing story does not appear to be as serious as it could be or if people are not personally close enough to the story, then they tend to become inured. Perhaps if Loyola students knew a significant number of people who have contracted swine flu, then the campus would be just as paranoid as it was at the beginning of the semester.

But chances are that most Loyola students know at least one person who has been hit by swine flu. And chances are that this person has made a full recovery. At

the moment, it appears that this flu season may have one of the highest proportions of media coverage to actual deaths caused by the flu. "Swine flu hysteria" seems to have died down, so it no longer appears terribly unhealthy that H1N1 is receiving the sort of the coverage that it is receiving. But a few years from now, it may be looked on as an oddity that for some reason was worried over as much as the 1918 flu epidemic. Or, who knows, it may mutate into the next HIV virus. Hopefully, if anything will remain permanently routine as a result of the swine flu scare, it will be an increase in sanitary measures. Emphasis on routine, as it implies a lack of paranoia.