

Jeffrey Malone

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Swine Flu Hysteria

When just about everyone on a college campus has become a hypochondriac, something unusual is going on. And when people are actually getting sick – not just imagining it – all the hypochondriacs might believe that the disease that is spreading is much worse than it actually is. One wonders how soon we will all become Howard Hughes-type recluses.

With seasonal flu arriving strong and early at Loyola in addition to the lingering presence of the H1N1 swine flu pandemic, keeping healthy has been an insistent priority for just about everyone. While both swine flu and seasonal flu are significant health concerns, the campus reaction has at times gotten close to paranoia. Flu season comes around every year, and it is always accompanied with tips on keeping clean and sanitary. But this year, with the development of the new H1N1 strain, the flu has been made out to be a lot scarier than it has ever been.

The September 8 issue of the Greyhound feature no fewer than four articles relating to swine flu. Two of these articles originated from outside news sources, so it is not necessarily the case that a ton of Loyola students are scrambling to have their voice heard about this pandemic. But the fact that those articles were chosen is still quite telling in terms of the sentiment among the Greyhound's writers. The article about the Health Center's response to H1N1 makes one question if the extra coverage is even necessary, as it notes that some H1N1 cases "can be quite serious, while in other cases it can be milder than any other influenza." The major cause for

concern seems to be that, as a new strain of influenza, there is no vaccine as yet to combat H1N1. Essentially, then, students may be unable to preemptively combat swine flu beyond just keeping sanitary. As the article suggests, a week of seasonal flu may be just as bad, possibly worse, than a week of swine flu, so the heightened concern as compared to other flu seasons may be more due to psychology rather than the severity of swine flu itself.

Here at WLOY there has been no immunity to the concern over swine flu. At the weekly board meetings, warnings have been made to keep your workspace clean and avoid coming into work if you are feeling sick. Big bottles of hand sanitizer and a dispenser of Clorox wipes are placed prominently, serving as a reminder that WLOY board members do not want to get sick. This behavior is at worst only mildly paranoid, but it is notably more serious than WLOY's reactions to flu season in the past.

This desire to not get sick has forced some groups to change their normal activity. For example, mass in Loyola's Alumni Chapel has been unusual this semester with the suggestion to avoid shaking hands during the Sign of Peace and instead offer some sort of greeting without any bodily contact. This caution has also made Loyola's tradition of greeting one's fellow churchgoers before the start of Mass less intimate. Father Jack Dennis has been particularly affected by the concern over swine flu. While presiding over one Sunday Mass, he said that it pained him to not exhort everyone to reach across the aisles and join hands during the Lord's Prayer, a tradition of his while performing Mass.

While H1N1 may not be significantly more dangerous than the average flu, its very newness seems to have wildly encouraged germaphobic behavior. It is certainly reasonable to want to remain healthy, but hopefully not at the expense of your own sanity.