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Health or honesty: Which takes priority?

By SUSAN PINKER
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

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Dear Susan,

My workplace, a large college, now has an H1N1 policy that allows students, staff and faculty to self-diagnose and then stay home for a week. I suspect that a fair number of students and colleagues are using this honour system to defer exams and papers and are not really sick. As chairperson, should I suggest that we ask for a doctor's note in suspicious cases?

- PG, Ontario

Dear PG,

Unless you are demonstrating good hygiene habits through 20 seconds of non-stop sudsing, I don't suggest taking matters into your own hands. Asking for a bona fide medical diagnosis will cut down on cheaters, to be sure, but it will also risk spreading the virus in a population that is hardly retiring or risk-averse.

Most students have little natural immunity to this flu strain, one of the few drawbacks of having been born within the last 25 years. They are also prone to engage in high-risk activities, such as gathering in tightly knit groups in cafés, libraries, dorms and lecture halls, hugging, kissing and touching each other's laptops.

These are just a few reasons why they have the second-highest H1N1 hospitalization rate, after infants, of any age group, according to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

When I checked the CDC's prevention plans and Canada's public health guidelines, both sites suggested that people who think they have H1N1 should simply stay home, without seeking a doctor's confirmation. Why should you be the renegade?

Because cheating is wrong, of course. Allowing some students an extra week to cram and hand in assignments is unfair to straight-shooters. Abusing the self-report system is like plagiarism - it confers an advantage on those who would break the rules.

But it is also the lesser evil, says Daniel Weinstock, the director of the Centre of Research in Ethics at the University of Montreal, and head of Quebec's ethics committee on public health.

"The worst-case scenario would be having our already stretched-to-the-limit medical personnel have to write a bunch of notes. In the present circumstances, tolerating a bit of cheating is the lesser evil," he wrote in an e-mail.

You'd only be justified in asking for proof if you believe that discouraging cheaters trumps preventing the spread of H1N1. Most institutions and businesses have sided with prevention, said Nicholas King, an assistant professor of biomedical ethics and occupational health at McGill University.

It's really a question of competing values - promoting honesty on the one hand, health on the other. When it comes to the distaste you feel at turning a blind eye to dishonesty, "to maximize health in a community, you often get things you don't like," Dr. King said. Quarantines during the SARS crisis, mandatory treatment of TB or forced evaluations for violent psychiatric illnesses are what happen when individuals in our society are expected to knuckle under what's best for the group.

"There are a lot of precedents out there that show that the health of the community is of paramount importance," according to Dr. King.

Ignoring a few small-time cheaters is just another one of those trade-offs.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of [The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap](#).

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