R.I. Using e-Prescribing Data to Track H1N1

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER

Public health officials in Rhode Island are using electronic pharmacy data to track the use of oseltamivir and other antiviral medications being used to treat patients infected with the pandemic influenza A(H1N1) virus.

As part of an ongoing partnership with Surescripts, an electronic prescribing network, all 181 pharmacies in Rhode Island now can send and receive prescription information over a secure network. As a result, pharmacies are able to transmit information to the Rhode Island Department of Health on all antiviral prescriptions written in the state.

At a press briefing, Dr. David Gifford, director of the Rhode Island Department of Health, said prescriptions for antiviral medications provide a good proxy measure for infection with H1N1 virus and are a complement to other surveillance systems such as school absenteeism and emergency department visits.

Additionally, if there are reports of a large volume of H1N1 illness in a community, but not a lot of prescribing of antiviral medication, that could indicate the need for more physician education, Dr. Gifford said. Conversely, if the pharmacy data show a large amount of antiviral prescribing in areas where there is not a lot of H1N1 activity, it could indicate inappropriate prescribing of oseltamivir (Tamiflu) for seasonal influenza, he said.

The statewide initiative, believed to be the first in the nation, lets pharmacies send data that have been stripped of personal information (other than age and zip code) to the health department on a weekly basis, allowing health officials to track the progress of the outbreak in communities. ■