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## When will our health hurricane hit?

**By Lorrie Goldstein – Toronto Sun**

Twice in recent years, first with SARS and now with H1N1, Canada's readiness to deal with a pandemic has been tested.

Both times, we failed miserably. Both times, all that stood between us and real panic and societal breakdown was not anything our politicians and governments did, but dumb luck.

SARS, as it turned out, was deadly but not particularly contagious.

H1N1, so far, is contagious, but not particularly deadly.

But one day, we'll be hit by something that is both deadly and virulent and we'll be sitting ducks. Today, Canada is New Orleans -- literally -- before Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. So far, we've dodged two bullets -- SARS in 2003, H1N1 in 2009 -- just as New Orleans dodged a direct, powerful hurricane hit for years before its luck finally ran out.

Like New Orleans, our luck won't last forever and the biggest danger we face is what eventually drowned New Orleans -- complacency.

Complacency born of repeatedly escaping disaster due to dumb luck, and thus wrongly concluding the disaster will never come.

The problem in New Orleans was that decade after decade, governments at all levels and of all stripes failed to fix the levees they knew would not protect the city from a direct hit by a powerful hurricane.

Just as our governments, decade after decade, undermined our health care system through such irresponsible attempts at cost-cutting as deliberately creating a doctor shortage in the early 1990s, while wasting billions of our tax dollars not delivering on eHealth.

That has led to millions of Canadians today not having a family doctor.

You can't fake a response to a deadly, contagious pandemic, as our politicians and governments of all

stripes have been doing with H1N1, by blaming each other and denouncing queue-jumping hospital boards and athletes, or criticizing a private clinic to which the government shipped vaccine.

Those are irrelevant distractions that only tell us -- surprise! -- the rich and influential get better health care than everyone else.

Fakery, spin

The real problem is you can't stop a fast-moving, deadly pandemic with fakery, misdirection and spin.

Either you have enough family doctors and nurses who can diagnose patients and get the vaccine into people's arms quickly, or you don't.

Either you have enough surge capacity in hospital emergency rooms, and on the wards, to handle the sudden increase in sick people, or you don't.

Either you have enough isolation and intensive care rooms, or you don't.

Either you have enough ventilators, or you don't.

Either you have enough hospital staff, properly trained in infection control, or you don't.

Either you have enough public health units, and workers, or you don't.

We don't have any of this.

What we do have is a doctor shortage.

What we do have are hospital ERs overwhelmed by patients in normal times.

What we do have is a shortage of acute care hospital beds.

What we do have is five royal commissions over the last 12 years -- as Dr. Allison McGeer, head of infection control at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital has noted -- warning us we've gutted public health care and our ability to respond to a pandemic.

In the wake of H1N1, no doubt, we'll get a sixth.

But nothing will change, leaving us as sitting ducks in the face of the next pandemic, when our luck may finally run out.