



High-tech tool warns of flu outbreaks

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A high-tech tool designed to warn of bioterror attacks is helping to pinpoint influenza outbreaks in Oklahoma City and Tulsa.

The FirstWatch system used by the Emergency Medical Services Authority scans 911 calls and gathers information about the medical symptoms of emergency patients.

The computer software has identified clusters of flu activity in Oklahoma's two largest cities from calls to EMSA dispatch centers.

The system notifies the ambulance service that it must increase staffing to treat and transport more patients, said Frank Gresh, EMSA communications director.

"We weren't planning on this system being used for this reason so quickly. But it's been a big help," Gresh said.

Lately, it has picked up general flu symptoms that can include a sudden onset of fever of 100 degrees or higher, chills, headache, sore throat, stuffy nose, cough, extreme tiredness and body aches.

FirstWatch issued its first "flu alert" Nov. 20 when it spotted irregularities in ambulance-call volume related to flu activity in the Oklahoma City metro area. A FirstWatch flu alert for Tulsa was issued Nov. 22.

FirstWatch has been used in other communities to detect gas leaks after a number of people complained of nausea and lightheadedness. Other day-to-day applications include heat alerts and asthma and allergy problems.

OU Medical Center is treating as many as 50 patients a day with flu-like symptoms in its emergency department. Patients who are admitted generally have other underlying health issues, hospital spokesman Allen Poston said.

At Mercy Health Center, 27% of patients screened for influenza between Nov. 1 and Nov. 19 tested positive, said Nancy Woodard, public relations coordinator.

"Tuesday, we saw 45 patients with the flu," said Judith McMinn, Deaconess Hospital emergency manager. "This will probably continue through the holiday. We expect Thursday and Friday to be very busy since many physicians' offices will be closed."