

Infection Control and Respiratory Protection: A Matter of Perspective

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Controversy involving the predominant mode of transmission of influenza virus and the protective equipment needed by healthcare workers to reduce risk of acquiring influenza emerged in the planning for influenza pandemics, and became a major issue in respect to the response to the influenza A H1N1 pandemic of 2009. Airborne infection precautions were recommended for healthcare workers caring for patients infected with "novel" influenza viruses, but droplet precautions were routine for seasonal influenza. The primary issue that arose was in respect to the need for respirators to block droplet nuclei versus surgical masks for larger wet droplets. The controversy arose because of limited data on influenza virus transmission, the high likelihood of exposure to influenza outside of healthcare settings, difficulty interpreting attack rates for influenza, and differences in perspective regarding influenza and its transmission between infection control/infectious disease professionals and occupational health/industrial hygiene professionals. The controversy was further compounded by the mild nature of disease caused by the 2009 pandemic strain. This presentation will highlight the basis of the controversy, and discuss the historical and cultural factors pertinent to the perspective of the infectious disease community.