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Safety Institute of Australia  
(Qld & NT Division) Inc.

# QUEENSLAND SAFETY CONFERENCE

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## Australia fails swine flu test

Australia appears to have failed the swine flu test and if we don't do better next time, the results could be disastrous, warns a speaker ahead of the Queensland Safety Conference.

In his June 18 address, Holding Redlich lawyer, microbiologist and biochemist, James Schluter, will tell occupational health and safety professionals they must take a leading role in preparing for a serious flu outbreak.

"This was our first major test of how we respond to a flu epidemic. We were very lucky to get what appears to be a 'mild' strain of swine flu. If we're not so lucky next time, 60 to 70 per cent of Australians could be too sick to go to work and that could lead to chaos," Mr Schluter said.

Pointing to an infection rate that puts Australia the highest of any country outside North America, Mr Schluter said, "Because health screening at the border relied on an 'honour' system, swine flu was inevitable in Australia. That doesn't make it inevitable that it would cause widespread infection. Swine flu has provided us with a relatively low risk 'dry run' on the government's influenza pandemic plan. It has revealed significant holes in that plan and a shortage of resources to properly implement it. In one case I know of, for example, the children were placed in quarantine but the mother was free to go to work."

Mr Schluter questions the effectiveness of community awareness campaigns surrounding the flu and will tell occupational health and safety professionals at the Queensland Safety Conference that employers must encourage a new workplace culture of infection prevention.

"The government very quickly lost control of any real engagement with the community," he said. "The public seemed to assume the government was engaging in scare tactics or diverting attention from other issues. They were then faced with conflicting messages from governments. Avian flu and SARS didn't make an impact here and I think government has struggled with the community experiencing a kind of 'flu fatigue'. People thought they'd be sick for a couple of days and better in a week."

"Nor were there enough messages explaining what people need to do to reduce the risk of infection. Indeed, we're now seeing a new trend of flu 'infection parties' where people think getting sick now means not getting sick in the future. That's not based on anything but rumour and the level of ignorance is really quite scary. We need to go back to basics. Australians struggle into work even when we're sick and that causes a huge occupational health and safety issue when the 'normal' seasonal flu is around.

"The frontline people of control are Australia's occupational health and safety professionals but the flu is often misconstrued as purely a public health issue. The workplace is a key area for transmission of disease, so it's essential that the workplace and OHS professionals are engaged, actively educated by scientist and health experts and part of the control campaign."

Mr Schluter will address Queensland Safety Conference on June 18. Presented by the Queensland and Northern Territory division of the Safety Institute of Australia, the conference will run from June 16 to 18 at the Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre concurrently with the Queensland Safety Show where more than 200 companies will showcase new workplace safety products and services. For more information, visit [www.qldsafetyshow.com.au](http://www.qldsafetyshow.com.au), email [safety@aec.net.au](mailto:safety@aec.net.au) or phone Australian Exhibitions & Conferences on 03 9654 7773.

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