

Swine Flu Rhetoric Anti-Hispanic

By Kristy Conlin | The News Record

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I knew this would happen. As soon as the swine flu began to dominate the media, I began to get a sick feeling in my stomach. And no, that bit of nausea wasn't actually related to the flu. It was related to the potential for a renewed and intensified bias against Hispanics and against Mexicans specifically. I wish I had been wrong. I wish I had overreacted.

But I wasn't. And I didn't.

Nowhere has the rhetoric been more prevalent, stronger or more vile than in the world of talk radio.

Here is just a partial list of the disgusting things that supposedly intelligent, educated people have said concerning the connection between the Mexican population and the spread of the swine flu.

"Make no doubt about it: Illegal aliens are carriers of the new strain ... of flu," said the particularly vile Michael Savage last week. "And it all starts in the restaurants," where he said, you "don't know if they wipe their behinds with their hands."

Really? Wow.

Savage went on to suggest the new flu strain may be a part of a terrorist attack. "I can't say for sure," he said too late, as the suggestion is already out there.

Sean Hannity, during his syndicated radio show, said last week that, of course, the borders should be sealed, and he finds it "suspicious" that the areas of the U.S. that are experiencing the greatest numbers of swine flu cases - New York, California and Texas - are among those with the highest Hispanic populations in the nation.

Boston talk-show host Jay Severin was suspended after calling Mexican immigrants "criminaliens" and stating that hospital emergency rooms were "essentially condos for Mexicans."

Bill Cunningham has reportedly made another on-air "dirty Mexicans" comment (and apparently he has a long history of making derogatory comments about Mexicans).

And the list could go on and on (Neal Boortz, Lou Dobbs, Michelle Malkin, Betsy Perry).

The Cincinnati Enquirer even ran a story about Hispanic children in the area being bullied and teased about having swine flu. Jason Riveiro, of the Ohio League of United Latin American Citizens, reports that multiple parents have contacted him with complaints. The comment count on the story is at 133 and still rising.

In response to all the hatred and filthy language, Liany Arroyo, director of the national Council of La Raza's Institute for Hispanic Health, points out the obvious: Some people have opted to exploit the virus "as a mechanism to stir fear."

Carlos Gutierrez, an associate professor of Spanish at the University of Cincinnati who teaches a class on Hispanic culture in the United States, concurs with Arroyo.

"Hannity [for example] is just another unmoral, pharisaic voice that takes advantage of the worst weaknesses and fears that people harbor," Gutierrez said. "The pointing of geographic and ethnic fingers whenever there's an outbreak of something is an ugly business and a very old game that borders the xenophobic, to say the least."

A very old game indeed. Gutierrez draws a comparison to the 16th century, when the French called syphilis the "Spanish sickness," while the Spanish and Italians called it the "French evil." Similar scenarios can be cited throughout the ensuing 500 years of world history.

But what I don't understand is why, in this day and age, people are still using this type of rhetoric, why they would want to scare the bejeezus out of their countrymen.

It is impossible, realistically, to definitively stem the spread of any epidemic in today's world, and really, why waste time on assigning blame (although – for another time and another article, I suppose – I firmly believe it is the tactic of massive factory farming, as pioneered by the U.S., that is to blame for the swine flu) when more efforts should be put into cure and prevention?

Won't we ever get past this? Or will we just keep doing the same things, saying the same things, over and over again, all while expecting some different outcome?

I, for one, hope for more.