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The New Back-to-School Ritual: Quarantines

By [ROBBIE BROWN](#)

ATLANTA — It looks like a typical college dormitory: the functional single cots, the students lazing in pajamas and sandals, the laptops and iPhones clicked to [Facebook](#).

But the Turman South dormitory at [Emory University](#) in Atlanta is what administrators call a self-isolation facility. Or, as students call it, the Swine Flu Dorm. The Leper Colony. Club Swine.

It is a holding pen for the coughing, wheezing, hand-sanitizing souls whose return to college coincided with their infection by a serious and highly contagious virus. More than 100 strong at Emory, they belong to a growing number of students at colleges across America experiencing a bizarre start to the year: the on-campus quarantine.

The residents of Turman South receive free meals, do not attend class, and travel to the pharmacy in a van they call the Flying Pig. Linens are changed daily. A staff member brings grocery bags of [Tamiflu](#), granola, sports drinks, soup and thermometers. The goal is preventing the infected from sniffing and hacking their way into an epidemic.

There are now more than 2,000 [swine flu](#) victims on college campuses, according to [an American College Health Association survey](#). And as colleges welcome students back this month, they are keeping those infected with the H1N1 virus at a safe distance. On top of dispensing face masks, circulating lists of warning signs and encouraging contagious students to stay home, many campuses are roping off sick-student-only zones.

[Carnegie Mellon University](#) designated a vacant sorority house for the infected. [St. John's University](#) set aside a gymnasium. And Princeton did the opposite, reserving spaces for healthy students, so sick roommates can sleep in solitude.

Swine flu is most prevalent at colleges in the Southeast and Northwest, according to the health association survey, with the largest outbreaks at campuses in Georgia, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Washington. Of the 189 colleges that responded to the survey, more than half had experienced a swine flu case in the last week of August.

There have been no deaths and only three hospitalizations at colleges resulting from the disease, according

to the survey. The virus leaves victims with a fever, chills and body pains for three to five days. It can be fatal in extreme cases, especially among infants and the elderly.

But for most college students, it is a nuisance instead of a serious health risk. In cramped dorms and crowded classrooms, the disease is expected to spread rapidly as students return in the next month.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re seeing thousands of cases every week,” said Jim Turner, the executive director of the college health association.

At Emory, the students are living in a C-shaped, Modernist dormitory that had been slated for demolition. A notice is posted on the front entrance: “Only authorized students and staff may enter Turman South at this time.”

A typical stay at the dorm lasts two to four days. Students check out after going 24 hours without a fever or medication, although technically they may leave at any time. It has become a revolving-door operation, with the newly sick arriving as quickly as the healthy can leave; 20 to 50 students have lived there at a time in the last week.

Some students remain behind locked doors, with the lights off, sleeping as much as 16 hours a day. But the more social — and healthy — gather in a break room and swap gallows humor about their predicament. On a window, they have scrawled in marker, “Swine ’09.” Many students say they almost enjoy the quarantine. It is an adventure, a bonding experience and a chance for guilt-free laziness.

“We get to sleep all day and don’t go to class,” said Sarah Spitz, 18, a freshman from Wellesley, Mass. “It’s kind of great.”

But a bleary-eyed sophomore in a face mask, Josh Katz, 19, from Los Angeles, described his stay in Turman South as miserable.

“I’m behind on school work. I haven’t done anything in three days,” Mr. Katz said, a two-liter squirt bottle of hand sanitizer in front of him. “I wish I was meeting new people and socializing, but I’m stuck here.”

On Tuesday, when his flu began, Parth Patel, 18, a sophomore at Emory who is from Concord, N.C., would have agreed. His fever was 102.8 degrees. He was missing rugby practices. And he would need to make up seven hours of lectures.

He updated his Facebook status: “Being put under quarantine is like being put in a retirement home.”

But then Mr. Patel’s health began to improve, he lit into the dorm’s freezer of free snacks, and his friends designed a T-shirt: a pig with a thermometer in its mouth beneath the words, “I survived the Swine of ’09.”

By Thursday, as he prepared to leave the dorm, he updated Facebook again: “Now swine flu doesn’t sound

that bad after all.”

Health officials at Emory, who have not calculated the cost of the quarantine, estimated that nearly one in every five students would catch the disease without an isolation plan. By separating the sick and the healthy, they believe they can drastically reduce that figure.

Not that parents are always pleased with the approach. “My mom freaked out,” said Hamzah Iqbal, 18, a freshman from Kanpur, India. “She was worried I would get even worse if I lived with other kids who had the disease,” he said, adding, “I convinced her I wasn’t going to die.”

Carell Brown, 18, a freshman at Davidson College in North Carolina, found her four days in quarantine a mixed experience as well. On Tuesday, she collapsed outside her Spanish class and was rushed to the hospital with exhaustion and headaches.

Davidson has designated two break rooms for swine flu victims — one for boys, one for girls. Ms. Brown quickly made friends with her new suitemates.

“Ultimately, it wasn’t completely terrible,” she said. “You’d always rather be in your dorm room. But being in quarantine was a bond you can’t break.”

Professors were supportive, even parental, she said. When students tried to do classwork while quarantined, a teacher sent an e-mail message: “Your homework is to go to sleep. If you do anything else, you’re in trouble.”

That, Ms. Brown said, is a commandment even a college student can obey.

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