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Illin' in the Workplace

I caught a cold last week. No, it was not the swine flu. Though my head felt like it was going to explode, and I ran through enough tissues to deforest the Amazon, I was missing the two signature symptoms of the H1N1 virus — high fever and a racking cough — so I can rest assured I was laid low by some other, less headline-worthy bug.

Of course, this means I can still look forward to a bout with the swine flu — and maybe even the microbe trifecta if I contract the regular flu as well. The good news, such as it is, is that the new variant looks no more serious than the regular flu — it may make you wish you were dead, but that's all.

If there's a silver lining, it's that flu panic is getting people to realize something that should have been obvious: It's way too easy for us to make each other ill. One estimate is that "presenteeism" — employees coming to work sick, then infecting the rest of the workplace — costs businesses three times as much as workers calling in sick. One Brooklyn restaurant owner told me flu fears got him to install timers to remind his employees to wash their hands regularly — which only made me think: Wait, restaurant kitchen workers weren't washing their hands regularly before?

Everyone insists they want sick people to stay home, but they're not putting their paychecks where their mouths are: A just-released Community Service Society survey found 1.6 million New Yorkers have no paid sick leave. City Councilwoman Gale Brewer has introduced a bill to require all businesses to provide at least five days of paid leave per year, modeled on a San Francisco law that's been in place since 2007.

It wouldn't be perfect: Even in San Francisco, the law is enforced only when workers file complaints. But if it makes for fewer celebrations of Bring Your Germs to Work Day, it'll be paper well shuffled.

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