

Many Health-Care Workers Shun Flu Shots

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Doctors fight an annual battle to persuade patients to get flu shots. But it turns out that persuading the doctors - and nurses, and other clinicians - to take their own advice and get those very shots is nearly as trying.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that everyone be vaccinated, but only about 63 percent of health care workers are, according to a survey published by the CDC in August.

"It's one of the profession's nasty secrets," said Dr. Gary Rose, associate professor of general medicine at Florida Atlantic University's College of Medicine. "Doctors need to take care of the sick; and if they're sick, they can't do a very good job of it."

Last year, the staff vaccination rate at Boca Raton Regional Hospital clocked in at 44 percent, only slightly better than the state's general population - an abysmal 36.5 percent.

Last month, on the cusp of a new flu season, the hospital announced plans to improve that rate with a mandatory vaccination policy: Get a shot or wear a surgical mask when you are in contact with patients.

Nationally, such a policy has been proven to push vaccination rates above 98 percent, according to a recent survey of health care professionals by the CDC.

In the past year, a majority of hospitals in Palm Beach County have embraced the data and adopted a mandate.

Yet nationally, it is a policy that appears to still be relatively uncommon - only 13 percent of those surveyed said their employer required a flu shot. Bethesda Memorial Hospital in Boynton Beach is among those advocating but not mandating a flu shot for employees who come in contact with patients.

Such mandates are unpopular with some employees. At a hospital in the Seattle area, nurses won an exemption to the policy requiring them to wear masks should they opt out of the shot. A local newspaper reported that a five-year grievance over wearing masks is now pending before the National Labor Relations Board.

Tenet reaches 90 percent

Palm Beach County's three HCA hospitals - JFK Medical Center in Atlantis, Palms West Hospital in Loxahatchee and Columbia Medical Center in West Palm Beach - have a mandate.

The area's five Tenet-owned hospitals - Delray Medical Center, Good Samaritan and St. Mary's medical centers in West Palm Beach, Palm Beach Gardens Medical Center and West Boca Medical Center - implemented a "get a shot or wear a mask" policy last year.

The payoff: 9,000 of 10,000 Tenet employees in Florida were vaccinated in the 2010-2011 flu season, spokesman Ryan Lieber said.

The CDC reported that the highest compliance rates were at clinics and hospitals with such a mandate. Short of that, employers that offered the shots on site and then issued reminders to get vaccinated had the second-best rate at nearly 70 percent.

In 2007, the Joint Commission required the more than 19,000 hospitals and long-term care centers that it accredits to establish an annual flu shot program that offers the vaccine on-site and to keep a tally of vaccination rates.

That approach wasn't enough for Boca Raton Regional.

"Historically, all staff was educated on the importance of influenza vaccination and provided with free immunization throughout the influenza season. In spite of these efforts, like many other health care facilities nationwide, staff immunization levels did not meet (Boca Regional's) high expectations. Therefore, this year, (Boca Regional) has implemented a new policy," the hospital's director of infection control, Dianne Patterson, said in an email to The Palm Beach Post.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services is expected in 2013 to make flu vaccination rates an item on which a hospital's quality of care is rated.

"It's very important for patient safety," said Kelly Podgorny, project director in the Joint Commission's division of health care quality evaluation. "A vaccination will decrease the likelihood of transmission."

When a particularly virulent strain of the flu comes along, national health authorities make sure that doctors and nurses are among the first in line to be vaccinated, said FAU's Rose.

Union opposes mandates

Still, not every hospital is on board with a mandate.

"We do make it a choice for our employees," Bethesda Hospital spokeswoman Lisa Kronhaus said, "and the reason we do is because OSHA does not mandate workers to have a flu shot.

"It is strongly recommended by the CDC so we give them a choice," said Kronhaus, adding there's no requirement that they wear a mask if they're not vaccinated.

Staffers there have begun trickling into Bethesda's shot clinic. Kronhaus said she got hers last month.

Last year, 623 of Bethesda's 978 employees, or almost 64 percent, got a flu shot, Kronhaus said.

While there have been no reports of local push-back to such policies, they have not been universally embraced.

"We're in support of flu shots for everyone, just not mandates," said registered nurse Pat Diaz, speaking for the Service Employees International Union's local chapter in Miami. The union represents thousands of doctors, nurses, lab technicians and other health care workers.

Diaz said some people are unable to get the shots for health reasons such as allergies. In addition, she called forcing workers to wear masks for hours a day for months of the year is unreasonable; and said standard masks are ineffective and intended to shame. "The patient or the doctor will ask what's wrong with you? It's a Scarlet Letter kind of thing," Diaz said.

Government health authorities said that when doctors and staff get flu shots, they get sick less often, miss fewer days of work, and are less likely to give the flu to their co-workers, families and patients.

Preventing the flu's spread isn't as simple as not coming to work when you're sick. Most people don't feel sick until a day or two after they're infected and contagious.

Not all workers convinced

So what's behind the subpar vaccination rates in the very profession that professes its benefits? Health care workers don't think it's worth their time and expense, and aren't convinced getting a shot will protect them and others from getting the flu, the CDC survey found.

"There are a lot of myths out there about the influenza vaccination and health care professionals," the Joint Commission's Podgorny said.

Dr. Charles Posternack, chief medical officer at Boca Regional, said he practiced the first 26 years of his 30-year career without a flu shot.

"Physicians believe they're healthy, eat right," he said. "Quite frankly what triggered it for me was when we had the epidemic of the swine flu. You realized how very mortal you are. I got my shot and had it ever since."

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