



North Shore News Column.

Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

B.C. makes bold move regarding flu shots

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News November 4, 2012

I was going to give my regular column on the flu shot a pass this year.

That was before we got the news that beginning in December, health-care workers in B.C. will be required to either get the influenza vaccination or wear masks when treating patients.

A word to the wise, now might be a good time to invest in companies that make surgical masks.

What's prompted this new policy? One in four health-care workers shows evidence of having the flu each year. And 70 per cent of them continue to work despite having flu-like symptoms.

The idea here is that hospital workers ought to be vaccinated to safeguard frail, elderly patients whose immune systems are so weakened they don't get much protection from a flu shot themselves.

The health authorities argue they have a responsibility to engage in certain infection control activities and the immunization of their employees is among those activities. They'll get no argument from me but this comes at a time when serious questions are being asked about how effective the flu vaccine actually is.

A number of studies suggest the evidence on the benefits of the flu vaccine are simply too shaky for any kind of imposed mandate. Even the strongest proponents of vaccinations have toned down their claims on the efficacy estimates of the flu shot to 50 to 70 per cent from the 70 to 90 per cent that was previously claimed.

The health care unions support improving the vaccination rates among staff, but would prefer to keep the vaccinations voluntary.

Only approximately half of health-care workers in B.C. voluntarily roll up their sleeves to get a flu shot each year and that number is declining.

It's hard to convince the public to get a flu shot when health-care workers avoid it, if you'll pardon the pun, like the plague.

Personnel who are vaccinated will be provided with some sort of clip or button to attach to their hospital identification badge. The idea is to make easily identifiable to the supervisor who has had a flu shot and who needs to wear a mask. Of course the button also makes them easily identifiable and easily targeted by their fellow workers and the public.

In the United States, it's estimated that there are more than 200 health care organizations that have implemented a mandatory influenza vaccine program for staff. In most jurisdictions only medically documented conditions like an egg allergy (flu vaccine is grown in chicken eggs) is an acceptable reason for not getting immunized.

Failure to comply with the immunization policy leads to a suspension, and after that dismissal. Among health-care workers in the United States who had an employer requirement for vaccination the compliance rate is more than 98 per cent.

B.C. is the first province in Canada to require health-care workers to be vaccinated against the flu. It's a bold move. There's no reason to think the great majority of staff here will not comply with the new regulation. Still, I think the new policy is a lawsuit waiting to happen. The B.C.

Civil Liberties Association has already expressed serious concerns about the policy. And, while there is agreement that the flu shot should be available to those who want it, what about an individual's right to make informed, voluntary choices about the preventive health care we use?

There's the rub. If the new regulation becomes a battle between those who believe we must do everything we can to protect patients against a preventable health risk and those who believe their civil liberties are being violated, this one could turn very ugly, very quickly.

To read more about the flu shot and to view a list of North Shore clinics, see page 15. Tom Carney is the executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Contact him at 604-985-3852 or lions_view@telus.net.