



North Shore News Column.

Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

Flu shots: an important annual tradition

Too few seniors are opting to get the vaccine

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News November 6, 2011



Arvilla Read gets a flu shot from public health nurse Linda Buccanan at a flu clinic held Tuesday at North Vancouver's Silver Harbour Centre.

Photograph by: NEWS photo, Mike Wakefield

AT the beginning of every year I circle two dates on my calendar: July 1 is my wife's birthday and Oct. 15 is the day I write my annual column on the flu shot.

Guess which of those days I look forward to the most?

I assumed that my first column on the flu shot, penned in 2006, would be my last on the subject. After all, the statistics really don't change much from year to year.

About one in 10 adults and one in three children will come down with the flu during a normal flu season in

Canada. Health Canada reports that between 4,000 and 8,000 Canadians - mostly seniors - will die from pneumonia related to flu and many others may die from other serious complications from the flu.

Vancouver Coastal Health's flu awareness campaign uses the slogan, "Get your flu shot. It's safe and it works." It's catchy and I think correct with a couple of caveats. The flu shot does not work all the time. It's about 70 to 90 per cent effective in healthy adults. The success rate is somewhat lower in children and seniors. Those allergic to eggs shouldn't take it and some people experience short-term side effects after getting the shot, like a mild case of the flu. About one in a million people will develop GuillainBarre Syndrome, a nervous system disease, and most, but not all of them, will recover.

Flu drugs can pose risks of their own: 10 Canadians have died after taking Tamiflu while at least 84 have reported adverse reactions to the drug.

It's fair to say that over the years I have used this column to promote the flu shot. Every year I hear from seniors who became very ill after getting the flu shot. They tell me they will never get the flu shot again. I'm sympathetic but I don't believe that their experience is typical. I do think that the flu shot is currently the most effective measure we have for reducing the impact of influenza. Still, the number of calls to my office by those who are opposed to the flu shot or vaccinations in general grows every year. These callers now have their own research that suggests that vaccinations do more harm than good.

The response by the health authorities to the anti-vaccination crowd has been mostly to ignore them. I think that's a mistake. I'd like to see the health authorities develop a strategy to counter the idea that vaccinations are not safe. And if that means no more playing nice with the anti-vaccination crowd - well, so be it.

Influenza vaccination rates have more than doubled over the past decade but too few of the people who need them, like seniors and those with chronic conditions, get them.

This year's flu shot will give you protection against three strains of influenza viruses, including H1N1. People 65 years and older and their caregivers, as well as residents of nursing homes and other chronic care facilities, can get a free seasonal flu shot.

More information on the flu vaccine, the location of flu clinics, the complete list of who is eligible for a free flu shot and more can be found at www.immunizebc.ca.

You can book an appointment to get a flu shot with your family doctor, at a walk-in clinic, with your pharmacist or at a local community health centre. Be aware that some providers of the flu shot may charge for their service.

Vancouver Coastal Health began offering their flu shot clinics Nov. 1. All of their clinics are scheduled in the afternoon from 1:30 to 4 p.m. For a list of specific clinic dates, call the appointment line, at 604-983-6863, and follow the telephone prompts to flu clinic information.

The Seniors One Stop Information Line, 604-983-3303, can also help you find a clinic in your neighbourhood.

Don't forget to take your B.C. Care Card.

The best time to get the flu shot is in November or early December, to give the body time to build resistance before the flu season starts.

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 send an email to lions_view@telus.net.