

Vaccinate or mask pays off

Health care organizations in two provinces are starting to reap the benefits of mandatory influenza vaccination policies, despite strong push-back from health workers, said experts at the Canadian Immunization Conference in Ottawa.

Policies recently introduced in BC and New Brunswick that require health workers to get vaccinated or don a mask during flu season have deeply divided staff of all stripes. Some argue such policies are crucial for patient safety; others, an undue infringement of personal freedoms. There have been walkouts, terminations and grievances launched.

However, health authorities say early gains from the programs have been worth the struggle. Employee immunization rates are up; sick days are down; and in some cases, routine closures during flu season have stopped.

“We used to have two or three units that closed for periods because both the nurses and patients would get the flu — that’s stopped for the last two years,” said Marilyn Babineau, regional manager of employee health and wellness at Horizon Health Network in New Brunswick, at the Dec. 3 conference.

The health authority introduced a compulsory “vaccinate or mask” policy in 2012. It came on the heels of a disappointing voluntary campaign in which just 46% of Horizon workers got the flu shot. Now vaccination rates are holding steady near 70% and absenteeism has dropped an average of two hours per employee. “Multiply that by 13 000 employees and it doesn’t take long to start saving some money,” said Babineau.

BC introduced similar requirements for health workers in 2012, with similar success, said Deputy Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry. In the first year, immunization rates rose to 75%, with a decrease in sick days,” she said.

BC has faced some of the strongest opposition from health workers, including a grievance brought against the government by the Health Sciences Association of British Columbia, representing about 16 000 health care staff. At the crux of these arguments are questions about the effectiveness of the flu shot and the evidence supporting mandatory health



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Health authorities in New Brunswick and British Columbia report early gains from condition-of-service policies that require workers to get a flu shot or wear a mask.

worker vaccination, said Allison McGeer, director of infection control at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto. Efficacy in health adults is about 60%, she said, “but for all adults, getting vaccinated against influenza is a safer, healthier choice than not getting vaccinated.”

Ironically, part of the problem is that some randomized controlled trials overestimate the effectiveness of the intervention. European trials have shown consistently higher mortality in patients whose caregivers don’t receive the flu shot, with differences up to five percentage points. “I can remember seeing these results and thinking this is not possible,” said McGeer. “It’s unlikely the effect size is actually that big.”

But why squabble over effect size when it’s clearly greater than zero?

Babineau was surprised to discover widespread misconceptions about vaccination across all sectors of the health workforce. Early efforts to educate and dispel these beliefs paid off. “A memo sent out by the nurses’ union [backing the policy] was our biggest success of all,” she said. Recently, compliance with the policy is 100%.

The tide of opinion may also be turning in BC. In October, Arbitrator Robert Diebold dismissed the grievance brought against the province by the Health Sciences Association of British Columbia, ruling that the vaccination policy is a valid exercise of management rights. “The union said they would appeal but dropped this after a few weeks,” said Henry.

— Lauren Vogel, *CMAJ*

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