Mandatory flu vaccine for healthcare workers: The debate rages on

By ACSH Staff — September 19, 2014

Flu season is here, and once again the question arises as to whether or not flu vaccinations should be mandatory for health care workers. The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends that all healthcare workers get the vaccination in order to protect both themselves and the patients with whom they come into contact. However, a new report [1] from the CDC indicates that way too few healthcare workers and the regulatory and hospital boards who supervise them are listening.

According to the findings from the Internet panel survey of almost 2000 healthcare workers, only about 75 percent of those responding said they had received the flu vaccine. Coverage was highest among those working in hospitals, among physicians and nurses, and among those working in places where vaccination was mandatory. If vaccination was not required, coverage was highest among healthcare workers who had vaccinations offered on-site at no cost for either one day or multiple days. Disturbingly, about 16 percent of those healthcare workers who did not get vaccinated believe that they do not need the vaccine and another 20 percent were afraid of getting sick from the vaccine.

Among the conclusions from this report is that in the absence of vaccination requirements, expanding the number of healthcare facilities offering vaccination on-site, over multiple days, and at no cost might help sustain and improve influenza vaccination coverage among HCP [healthcare personnel].

However, as Dr. Gilbert Ross said in an op-ed [2] published in August in the New York Post, flu vaccination should be mandatory for healthcare workers. It’s outrageous for [New York] City’s health-care system to so needlessly put the sick and vulnerable at further risk. Seasonal influenza is highly communicable and potentially lethal. Vaccinating health-care personnel against it to protect both patients and workers should be a no-brainer.

And here’s yet another disturbing finding from the CDC: Only 46 percent of Americans [3] choose to get vaccinated against the flu, despite the recommendation from the CDC that everyone over six months of age should receive the vaccination. The CDC also recommends that pregnant women
receive the flu vaccine. Dr. Paul Offit, ACSH trustee and director of infectious diseases and director of the Vaccine Education Center and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, is very frustrated with these numbers and with the fact that parents seem more concerned about EVD-68, the respiratory virus that has been sending children across the country to the hospital, than influenza. Ebola and EVD-68 have collectively caused zero deaths [in America], but flu causes thousands of deaths here every year.

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[1] http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6337a1.htm