



Province backs down on flu shot edict

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By Jeff Nagel

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The province has granted a one-year reprieve from its directive that health workers wear a mask this flu season if they refuse to be vaccinated.

Those who don't comply won't be disciplined, deputy health minister Graham Whitmarsh said in a Nov. 30 letter to health authorities.

Enforcement that was to begin Dec. 1 is on hold while the ministry carries out more consultation with unions and other affected staff to help determine how best to fully implement the flu control policy, he said.

Provincial Health Officer Dr. Perry Kendall gave the needle-or-mask order this summer, citing an inadequate flu immunization rate of less than 50 per cent among B.C. health care workers despite free shots and much encouragement.

But unions denounced the policy as a privacy violation, saying the threat of discipline to compel unvaccinated workers to wear masks would have forced them to disclose their decision not to get a flu shot.

Those who did get vaccinated were expected to wear badges or pins to assure patients they were immunized.

Health Sciences Association of B.C. president Reid Johnson said the union encourages its members to be vaccinated but defends their right to choose.

"If they choose not to be vaccinated for any number of factors -including experiences with bad side effects to vaccines and fundamental, philosophical, or religious objections to vaccination - that is their right," he said.

Rather than enforcing a season-long order to mask up, he said, that step can be taken during an actual flu outbreak, along with other long-standing options such as relocating staff or having them stay home.

Hospital Employees' Union spokesperson Margi Blamey said some members questioned the research on the benefits of vaccination, while others refuse to have foreign substances put in their bodies or considered it a human right to make their own decision.

Despite the controversy, more health workers did roll up their sleeves. According to Kendall, more than 60 per cent of full-time health workers are now vaccinated.

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