



Mandatory flu shot policy suspended; Health workers urged to volunteer for needle

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By Terri Theodore, The Canadian Press

The province's health care workers objected to the mandatory vaccination program saying it was coercive and punitive. Photograph by: Jeff McIntosh, The Canadian Press Files , The Canadian Press The B.C. government has temporarily backed away from a controversial plan to force thousands of provincial health workers to get a flu shot before they can work with patients.

Instead of forcing workers to wear a mask or have the mandatory flu vaccination, the B.C. Health Ministry said it will work toward voluntary compliance from workers in the first year of the program.

In a letter dated Nov. 30 to B.C.'s health authority chief executive officers, deputy health minister Graham Whitmarsh said components of the influenza control policy would not be enforced for the first year.

"I would like to afford health care workers the additional opportunity to voice their opinions on how best to achieve our shared objective," his letter said.

The government launched the mandatory program to protect patients because it said a voluntary plan wasn't working. Fewer than 50 per cent of workers were being vaccinated against the flu in some health settings.

Three unions, the Health Sciences Association, Hospital Employees Union and B.C. Nurses' Union, launched union grievances over the policy.

Reid Johnson, president of the HSA, said the policy was coercive and punitive, and his members didn't like to be threatened. "To turn around and say you can be disciplined to the point of termination, it was invalid, it was over the top," he said.

The union recommends to all its members that they get an annual flu vaccine, but members have valid reasons to make their own health care decisions, Johnson said.

"They're entitled to that choice and they're entitled to the privacy of that choice. Under this new policy people had to be identified as having had the shot, in fact the employer was publishing a list of people who had the flu shot. We just said that was a violation of people's privacy."

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