

BULLETIN

Union cites possible 'philosophical or religious objections' as B.C. nurses balk at forced flu vaccinations

October 23, 2012

National Post

Despite accusations that they are "killers of the sick and elderly," a growing number of B.C. health-care workers are resisting a mandatory flu shot, arguing that it is an issue of personal choice. And now, a union representing thousands of health-care workers in the province, is telling them they have a right to opt out, even if that potentially works against public health efforts to stop the spread of the disease.

"We always encourage our members to get vaccinated, but we also believe that they have a right to make their own personal health choices," said Miriam Sobrino, spokeswoman with the Health Sciences Association of B.C., the union representing the province's non-nurse, non-doctor health-care professionals.

Related

[Ethnic communities more likely to get flu shot, study reveals](#)

[Flu shots for pregnant women protect babies from being born too small: study](#)

An Oct. 18 statement by the union acknowledges that health-care workers may wish to eschew vaccination for any number of factors, including "philosophical or religious objections."

"They don't believe in vaccination for whatever reason - I don't know what the reasons are," said Ms. Sobrino.

In August, B.C. became the first jurisdiction in Canada to legislate mandatory flu shots for doctors, nurses and any other healthcare worker who may come into contact with patients. In previous years, the rate of inoculation for the province's health-care workers had been below 50%, one of the lowest in Canada.

"We know that a surprising number of health-care workers will go on working even when they have symptoms of influenza," provincial health officer Dr. Perry Kendall told CBC at the time. "Influenza is not a trivial illness, particularly for vulnerable people."

However, the B.C. Nurses Union immediately struck back at the plan as a "punitive action," - particularly since it forced the non-vaccinated to spend the flu season wearing a surgical mask.

"It's just a way to identify the unclean, I think, and stigmatize them into being vaccinated," said Sara Gough, a Vancouver-based registered nurse who refused the shot.

Ms. Gough said the provinces' anti-flu shot faction is balking mostly at the "forced nature" of the policy. "I know nurses who have gotten the shot in previous years who are so angry this year that they're not getting the vaccine as a protest," Ms. Gough said.

In response, anti-vaccine nurses are accused of being "killers of the sick and elderly," wrote Ms. Gough in an email to the National Post.

Vaccine opponents contend that vaccination is not worth the hassle, citing recent reports that the shot may not be as effective as previously thought.

"Do traffic lights prevent all fatalities and traffic accidents? Does that mean we should stop using traffic lights?" said Dr. Allison McGeer, an infectious disease consultant at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital.

"More patients are alive at the end of flu season if healthcare workers get vaccinated ... we have lots of supportive evidence for that," she said, adding "influenza is still the single most common infectious disease cause of death in Canada."

In a November op-ed, University of Toronto bioethics researcher Ross Upshur maintained that eschewing a flu shot fundamentally violates the credo of "do no harm." If healthcare workers "are vectors of disease for hospitalized patients, they are putting patients at risk for increased harm," he said.

It is "disheartening" to see how few Canadian professionals are getting the flu shot, even if they work with children and the elderly, said Maher El-Masri, a nursing professor at the University of Windsor. "I think we have a responsibility to protect our patients."

Nevertheless, he said the B.C. government's actions might be going a "bit too far." While there is "absolutely a benefit" to inoculating health professionals, there is no definitive research weighing the benefits of vaccinating an entire province's worth of health-care workers.

"If we don't vaccinate, how many people are we killing, and how many people are we putting at risk for increased complications?" he said.

National Post, with files from Postmedia News

Type:

[HSA in the news](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)

180 East Columbia
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website
www.hsabc.org

Telephone 604-517-0994
1-800-663-2017