

BULLETIN

Health union fighting needle-or-mask flu edict

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Byline: Jeff Nagel

Health care workers say a government order that they get the flu shot or else wear a mask this flu season amounts to a violation of their personal privacy.

The Health Sciences Association of B.C. has filed a grievance on behalf of its members, who include various lab and imaging technologists, pharmacists and therapists.

Union president Reid Johnson said the edict that those who choose not to be vaccinated must wear a mask may expose them to criticism from the public.

Meanwhile those who comply are to wear a sticker, badge or button to assure patients they've been vaccinated.

As a result, he said, health professionals will be divided into two visible camps on the contentious issue of flu vaccination.

"They have the right to keep that private," Johnson said. "To be identified as having taken their flu shot or not taken it, we believe is a human rights issue."

Health workers have a right to make their own choices, he said, adding some choose not to be vaccinated due to chronic medical conditions or bad side effects in the past.

"They may also have personal, philosophical or religious reasons for not getting vaccinations - that needs to be respected."

The use of masks may make it harder for some patients who don't hear well to understand health workers, Johnson added.

The directive to get the influenza vaccine applies to all health authority staff, doctors, volunteers, students, contractors and vendors who work in patient contact areas of community or publicly funded facilities.

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

John O'Neil, dean of SFU's health sciences faculty, called it a "dangerously low" vaccination rate that raises the risk of illness and death among vulnerable patients.

"It's irresponsible for those of us in public health not to take every possible precaution," he said, endorsing the new policy.

O'Neil acknowledged there's a risk health employees who refuse vaccinations and mask up will send the signal they harbour doubts, sowing more skepticism in the public about vaccine safety.

"That could be an unfortunate side effect of this policy but that's what we have to do to protect people in our health care system," he said.

Some shaming wouldn't be a bad thing, O'Neil added.

"If there was a way of putting a label on health care workers who don't wash their hands - we should do that, quite honestly."

O'Neil said the scientific evidence for the safety of vaccines is "solid" despite large amounts of misinformation online from interest groups, including alternative medicine sellers with a vested interest in fomenting fear.

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