

BULLETIN

## **Sick of the flu shot; Some health care workers in the Peace Region against mandatory vaccination**

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### **Alaska Highway News**

As flu season begins, the recent decision to require health care workers to either take the vaccine or wear a mask is being challenged by the Health Sciences Association (HSA).

The unpopular measure has divided medical professionals in the Peace Region.

"We're being asked to put something in our body (and) we have no idea where it's coming from," said one local health care worker, and member of the HSA.

"From my standpoint, (I'm) very leery about any kind of vaccine because of safety and when you get a flu vaccine it's a guess ?- they make a guess, an educated guess, as to which flu bugs will cross over from offshore."

With vaccination rates among health care workers less than 50 per cent, Dr. Perry Kendall, the province's provincial health officer, made the recommendation in August that anyone who comes into contact with patients at publicly funded health care facilities must get the influenza vaccine or wear a mask.

The goal is to prevent transmission of the virus to patients, who often have compromised immunity. Yet, critics argue that it is too intrusive and not a proportionate response to the problem.

"For years now, I've never gotten a flu vaccine," said the local hospital worker. "I never will if I can avoid it, and it doesn't feel like a free choice."

She added that she does not believe that it will help prevent the flu from spreading to patients at the hospital.

"For me, personally, I don't believe that I need to go to a lab somewhere to protect my own immune system.

It's a different story when we're talking measles, mumps rubella, polio - things like that. Historically, men gave their lives to that cause.

"There's a different morality - ethic - when you think about the old fashioned reasons that people wanted to get vaccines into medicine, now it's just marketing - it's money."

However, some other health care professionals believe that there is a moral obligation to get the job.

"I'm all for the mandatory flu virus," said one licensed practical nurse.

"Unless the entire population, 90 per cent and above, has got that resistance to that disease, it won't necessarily stop those outbreaks.

"The amount of information supporting getting your annual flu shot is just overwhelming and to be perfectly honest, a shot in the shoulder is not nearly as nasty as actually getting the flu itself."

During a visit to the Peace Region, Dr. Shelley Ross, president of the British Columbia Medical Association, said that her organization backs the decision.

"It came down from the provincial public health officer that people should have their flu shots if they're working with patients, and we certainly are supportive of that stance," she said.

"We're always about what's best for patient. If you're looking after patients that aren't well, they're more susceptible to getting sick and so we would certainly feel terrible if we were the ones who brought in the flu and gave it to them... even though the flu shots are certainly not a 100 per cent guarantee that you're not going to get the flu, they're better than nothing."

The B.C. Nurses Union has expressed some concern with the measures, but are recommending that people comply with the new rule.

However, the HSA objects to the making the flu shot mandatory and the association also has reservations about the way the policy is being implemented.

"They shouldn't have to risk getting fired because they don't wear a button that says 'I got a shot' and that's what we object to," said Reid Johnson, president of the health sciences association of B.C. "That's sort of the core of this, the human rights that come into play here.

"We have always encouraged our members to get vaccinated every flu season, but we also accept that they have a right to make personal choices about their health care. So it may be they have a preexisting health condition, or they've had adverse reactions to the flu shots in the past or they've got some personal reasons." The union represents a variety of health care workers, other than doctors and nurses, such as lab technologists, imaging technologists, pharmacists, dietitians, social workers, respiratory therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists.

"The people that are often unseen or unrecognized in a hospital," added Johnson.

While the hospitals are offering surgical masks as an alternative to the vaccine, he said that this would impede the ability of some people to do their job.

"We've got speech and language pathologists that work in hospital with stroke patients... their whole business is speech and language and they're going to have to wear a mask. It doesn't always mean that people are going to be able to carry on their role in the hospital."

He also had concerns about the efficacy of the masks for preventing the spread of the virus.

"As far as I know, none of the health care unions were consulted on this, it just came as an edict from the health employers and our members are the professionals that are delivering the health care, they certainly have ideas about how to improve and prevent the spread of disease in a hospital."

According to Johnson, the punishments are severe. They can be sent home without pay, suspended and may eventually result in them losing their jobs.

However, Northern Health said that while the vaccination program is rolling out, there will be no repercussions for health care workers who do not comply.

"We're expected to be fully compliant and we intend to work with our staff to insure that they are providing the safest health care possibly in our communities," said Steve Raper, director of communications.

Johnson noted that sending health care professionals home in a small community can be difficult.

"I'll tell you, places like (this), there's critical shortages around the province of health science professionals ?- lab technologists, imaging technologists, physiotherapists - you send someone home, there's no one to replace them."

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