

BULLETIN

Mandatory flu shots for health workers delayed; Government temporarily backs away from its original plan

December 5, 2012

Alberni Valley Times

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 towards 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."

The program was to start Dec. 1, but the deputy minister told health authority CEOs it would be engaging in additional consultation with both the unions and impacted groups to best determine an approach before fully implementing the policy.

The B.C. Nurses Union said it also welcomes the decision by government.

"Given the clearly conflicting evidence about the effectiveness of the (flu) shot, we were very much opposed to policies aimed at forcing workers to get it," Debra McPherson, union president, said in a statement.

She said her union is more than willing to work with employers and the Health Ministry over the issue.

"It has always been about education, not punishment." Influenza is an infection of the upper airway caused by a virus. Those who catch the flu are also at risk of other infections such as bacterial pneumonia, an infection of the lungs.

Each year the flu vaccine is reformulated in order to match what scientists believe will be the circulating viral strain that winter.

It's estimated that about 8,000 people die from the flu or its complications every year in Canada.

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