

BULLETIN

Workers cheer softened stand on flu shots

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By Rod Mickleburgh

VANCOUVER -- The province's health-care workers are hailing a last-minute reprieve in a landmark policy by public health officials that would have forced them to receive a flu shot or wear a surgical mask during their shifts.

Staff who refused to comply with the policy - the first of its kind in Canada - would have been liable to discipline, up to and including termination.

But late last week, the Health Ministry agreed to hold off enforcing the flu-shot decree for the next year, and renew efforts to persuade public health-care personnel to agree to be immunized. The mandatory policy was to have taken effect Dec. 1.

"This is a huge relief," BC Nurses' Union president Debra McPherson said Monday. "It was creating a lot of anger and frustration in the workplace."

As the deadline for compliance approached, hospitals were posting public lists of nurses who had been immunized and encouraging employees to report on other workers who had not received their shots, Ms. McPherson said.

"It was really upsetting. Now, some of the poison has been stopped. It's taken a lot of the pressure off."

Jeanne Meyers of the Health Sciences Association, the first of three health-care unions to file a grievance against the new rule, said HSA members are "absolutely pleased" by the easing of the approach.

"We've agreed to put our grievance in abeyance, and they are holding enforcement in abeyance," Ms. Meyers said. "Our membership is very relieved."

The nurses' union, the HSA and the Hospital Employees' Union, together representing more than 100,000 health-care workers, objected to their members being forced to have a flu shot, or wear a mask, while at work. "Nurses felt it was a real violation of their right to direct their own health care, that it was questioning their own critical judgment," Ms. McPherson said. She said studies have shown that flu shots offer only marginal benefits.

Despite that, the BCNU and other health-care groups continue to recommend immunization to members. "It's the best we've got," Ms. McPherson said. "But it has to be a matter of choice."

A statement released by the Health Ministry confirmed it will be taking "a balanced and measured approach" for the next 12 months and will not be disciplining employees. Instead, it will focus on "education and awareness" to boost flu-shot compliance among health-care workers.

When they announced the policy last August, public health officials said they were tired of the fact that fewer than 50 per cent of the health-care staff would get a flu shot year after year, despite extensive education campaigns. Already, with the threat of discipline hanging in the air, compliance rates have shot up more than 60 per cent, the highest on record, according to the ministry.

"I think a number of employees were coerced and scared that if they didn't get one, they would be disciplined," said Ms. Meyers of the HSA. "So those numbers don't surprise me."

B.C. doctors, meanwhile, continue to support the edict. "We see it as a way of showing leadership, and as a way to protect our patients," said Shelley Ross, president of the BC Medical Association. "We feel it's good to get a flu shot."

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