



Flu shot rules relaxed; B.C. health-care workers have year to ease into new policy

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By Mike Youds

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A decision to ease introduction of a policy requiring thousands of health-care workers to receive flu vaccinations is winning applause from some corners.

Instead of forcing workers to get flu shots, the Health Ministry says it will work toward getting compliance from workers in the first year of the program.

The bottom line is that vaccination rates among health-care workers need to be increased through education, said Susan Duncan, president of the B.C. Association of Registered Nurses, a professional organization.

"I would say it's positive," Duncan, a TRU instructor on sabbatical, said about the latest decision. "We have to do something and I think it's always better when people are working together to get the best system possible."

In a letter to B.C.'s health authority CEOs, deputy health minister Graham Whitmarsh said components of the influenza control policy would not be enforced for the first year.

The policy was to go into effect Dec. 1 and required employees who work with patients to get a flu shot or wear a mask under threat of discipline, including dismissal.

Several health-care unions, including the Health Sciences Association and the B.C. Nurses Union, launched a grievance arguing their workers are entitled to privacy and their own choice on the matter.

Association president Reid Johnson says the union is pleased the government has decided to take a different approach and that it's happy to work with the Health Ministry to set up the flu prevention policy.

B.C. is the first province in Canada to impose flu vaccination rules on public health-care workers.

Duncan noted that the new rules announced in August by the provincial health officer were not mandatory. Workers with health or philosophical issues were given the alternative of donning a mask or a badge.

She says, however, that U.S. research shows participation in vaccination increases to as high as 80 or 90 per cent when rules are introduced.

"You need those rates up around 80 or 90 per cent because that's what we call, in public-health terms, 'herd immunity.' "

That high degree of participation can virtually eradicate a virus, she added.

There are barriers to participation, such as difficulty obtaining the shot during work hours and lack of awareness, but those can be addressed through education, Duncan said.

"It's always good to involve people in solutions."

About 60 per cent of full-time health authority staff have already been immunized, according to the Health

Ministry. That's higher than the participation rate cited by Dr. Perry Kendall, provincial health officer, when he announced the new rules.

According to figures from the provincial health officer, the flu vaccine is 70 to 90 per cent effective when there is a good match for the strains prevalent in any given year.

"It's consistent with best practices, I would say, because we have to protect patients."

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