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Health workers shun flu shots, putting patients at risk

25 percent at Delaware hospitals weren't vaccinated last year

By HIRAN RATNAYAKE
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Though hospitals actively encourage the public to get flu shots, thousands of health care workers in Delaware choose not to get vaccinated, putting patients at risk, experts say.

The flu in certain groups — such as those with compromised immune systems and young children — can result in severe illness, more days in the hospital and added costs. It also kills

about 36,000 people across the country each year.

Because of that, health care workers for decades have been considered — just like the elderly and pregnant women — as a priority group for getting the vaccine, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

According to local hospitals, health care workers here refused to get the flu shot for reasons ranging from an aversion to needles — even though a nasal spray

is available — to the inconvenience of setting aside time to get vaccinated.

Some also claim they have never caught the flu and don't feel the shot is necessary. Others — even at hospitals with high infection rates — continue to harbor the misconception that the shot will give them the flu.

Whatever their reasons, one out of every four health care workers at Delaware's seven acute-care hospitals did not get

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Karen Kist, a registered nurse at Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children, gets a flu shot from registered nurse Clare Thomas.

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COVER STORIES

Flu: Vaccines an 'ethical responsibility'

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vaccinated last year — about 4,000 in all. St. Francis Hospital in Wilmington had the lowest vaccination rate at 54.7 percent.

The latest survey from the CDC shows that 62 percent of health care workers nationally got the seasonal flu shot last year. Dr. Greg Poland of the Infectious Disease Society of America said the rates are unacceptable.

"Why compare it to a low bar? That's like saying that 60 to 70 percent of the time we wash our hands or wear a mask in the operating room," said Poland, an infectious-disease specialist. "When it comes to the safety of the patients that we're privileged to care for, we should do and require everything reasonable to protect them."

Fatal outbreaks

An investigation into an influenza outbreak at an unidentified neonatal intensive-care unit in Ontario found that fewer than 25 of the 150 health care workers there had been vaccinated. The outbreak struck 19 infants and caused a baby's death. Another flu outbreak killed two patients in a bone-marrow transplant unit in a New York City hospital where 12 percent of workers had been vaccinated.

Other studies have shown that the flu can be spread by health care workers who show no symptoms but come to work with the flu.

"It's an ethical responsibility for workers to get the shots because a hospitalized patient is a vulnerable patient," said Poland, also director of the Mayo Vaccine Research Group in Rochester, Minn.

Last year, a doctor at St. Francis — the only hospital with vaccination rates that slipped from the previous

season — urged in a radio interview for people to get flu shots as late as December. The hospital's goal this season is 60 percent.

Spokeswoman Jenifer Harris says the hospital always has recommended the vaccine to its workers. She said the flu won't spread in the hospital because sick workers stay home.

"We have to trust that our colleagues are doing what's appropriate for them, so we have to respect the decisions they make," she said. "If we could get more folks to get vaccinated, that's fantastic, but we ultimately respect our colleagues to make the right decisions for their lives regarding vaccination."

The vaccination rate at Beebe Medical Center in Lewes was the second-lowest in the state at 58.7 percent.

"We are very happy with our numbers," spokesman Wally Hudson said.

One of those workers who refused the shot is Dr. Andrejs Strauss, a retired radiation oncologist and interim vice president of medical affairs. He said he has suffered a terrible reaction each time he got the shot.

"I feel so lousy after I get it, so I'll take my chances," he said. "I've even had other physicians look at me, and one of them said I was just one of those people who happens to get a nasty reaction."

Strauss said his cancer patients weren't at risk because many of them already had been vaccinated. He does not believe in hospital-mandated vaccinations.

But a growing number of groups — including the Infectious Disease Society of America, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Patient Safety Foundation — are taking the

Influenza vaccination rates, 2009-10 influenza season

Hospital	Number of health care workers	Seasonal flu vaccination rate	H1N1 flu vaccination rate
Christiana Care Health System — Christiana and Wilmington hospitals combined	7,500	77.5%	57.7%
A.I. duPont Hospital for Children	1,912	90%	85.9%
BayHealth Medical Center — Kent General Hospital	1,617	61.5%	35.2%
St. Francis Hospital	1,279	54.7%	43.0%
Beebe Medical Center	1,450	58.7%	36.1%
Nanticoke Memorial Hospital	1,097	93.9%	50.7%
BayHealth Medical Center — Milford Memorial Hospital	701	61.6%	38.5%

Source: Delaware Division of Public Health

position that the safety of patients trumps the individual rights of employees.

At least 50 hospitals, including the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, require workers to get vaccinated or — save for medical or religious reasons — face termination.

There's nothing unethical about forcing health care workers to get vaccinated, said Dr. Armand Antommaria, a bioethicist and pediatrician with Primary Children's Medical Center in Salt Lake City, Utah.

"As a health care worker, you have obligations to benefit your patients — sometimes at risk to oneself," he said. "... Health care workers have a moral obligation to attempt to minimize the transmission of the flu and the vaccine is an effective way to do that."

Ingraining shots in culture

Besides mandates, the best way to boost vaccination rates is to create a culture in which it's strongly encouraged, Poland said.

"What we've found is that when you have a champion for the vaccine, particularly in a position of authority, you have very high rates," he said. "You don't have high rates when you leave it up to the individual."

That kind of culture exists at Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children, said Karen Kist, a registered nurse and assistant nurse manager. Last September, the Rockland hospital used a pandemic drill as a means of vaccinating nearly every employee. Ninety percent of the health care workers at the children's hospital got the seasonal flu shot last season, compared with 63 percent in 2008.

Kist has received the shot each of the 13 years she's been working there.

"I do feel as a nursing professional it is our responsibility to get vaccinated," she said. "I do owe it to my patients to be safe for them."

Nanticoke Memorial Hospital's flu vaccination rate leaped to 94 percent last year from 74 percent in 2006. The

hospital's strategy is to educate workers about the flu shots at staff meetings and offer them while workers are on their shifts, said Brenda Johnson, the Seaford hospital's infection control practitioner.

Overall, Delaware's rates improved from the previous season, the first time hospitals were required by law to publicize their rates. The report showed that only about 64 percent of health care workers last year at local hospitals got vaccinated from swine flu. But those lower rates were attributed to saving the vaccine for patients in serious risk of complications from the flu.

Patients should find out the vaccination rates at their local hospital, said Dr. Stephen Lawless, DuPont hospital's vice president of quality and safety.

"If a hospital has rates that aren't high, those families should challenge the hospitals to get those rates higher," he said.

Contact Hiran Ratnayake at 324-2547 or hrattayake@delawareonline.com.