

July 22, 2011

## AHA Endorses Patient Safety Policies Requiring Influenza Vaccination of Health Care Workers

### AT A GLANCE

#### **The Issue:**

America's hospitals are committed to protecting the health and well-being of patients and staff. Evidence has emerged over the past few years clearly indicating that health care workers can unintentionally expose patients to seasonal influenza if the workers have not been vaccinated, and that such exposure can be dangerous to vulnerable patients.

To protect the lives and welfare of patients and hospital employees, the American Hospital Association's Board of Trustees recently approved a policy supporting mandatory patient safety policies that require either influenza vaccination or wearing a mask in the presence of patients across health care settings during flu season. This policy aims is to achieve the highest possible level of protection.

#### **AHA Call Series:**

The AHA will hold three conference calls featuring speakers from hospitals that have implemented mandatory vaccination policies, with a focus on best practices for putting such policies into practice. The calls will take place at the following dates and times:

- Friday, July 29 at 1:00 p.m. EDT
- Tuesday, August 23 at 1:00 p.m. EDT
- Thursday, September 8 at 1:00 p.m. EDT

For more information and to register to participate, visit  
<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/HSDCC2K>.

#### **What You Can Do:**

- ✓ Share this advisory with your senior management, senior leader for quality, infection control professionals, pharmacy director, purchasing director, clinic managers, nurse managers, key physician leaders and human resources director.
- ✓ Consider participating in one of the AHA conference calls on mandatory hospital health care worker influenza vaccination policies to learn more about this issue.
- ✓ If your hospital does not have a mandatory influenza vaccination policy for health care workers, we encourage you to consider adopting such a policy.

#### **Further Questions:**

Please contact Nancy Foster, AHA vice president of quality and patient safety, at [nfoster@aha.org](mailto:nfoster@aha.org) or Roslyne Schulman, AHA director of policy, at [rschulman@aha.org](mailto:rschulman@aha.org).

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### BACKGROUND

Influenza is a highly contagious disease that can be spread before symptoms appear and results in about 150,000 hospital admissions and 24,000 deaths annually. Hospitalized patients are particularly vulnerable to the dangers of influenza because their immune systems are often compromised by the illness that caused their admission or the treatments they are undergoing. Vaccination of health care workers (HCWs) has been shown to prevent illness and death in patients, and reduce influenza infections and absenteeism among HCWs. While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended annual vaccination of HCWs since 1981, only about half of HCWs in the United States are immunized annually.

In recent years, more and more hospitals and health care organizations are putting into place policies making seasonal influenza vaccinations mandatory for employees, affiliated medical staff, students, volunteers and contract workers as part of their commitment to patient safety. These policies often have resulted in vaccination rates above 90 percent.

Several key national professional organizations have endorsed mandatory policies for influenza vaccination as a condition of employment within health care facilities, including the Association of Professionals in Infection Control, American Academy of Pediatrics, Infectious Disease Society of America, National Patient Safety Foundation and Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America. The American Medical Association supports “universal” influenza vaccination of HCWs, but leaves it to each facility to decide whether or not a mandate is needed to achieve 100 percent vaccination coverage.

While the resources needed to implement a mandatory policy are significant, especially in terms of financial and personnel resources, the benefits of protecting vulnerable patients and reducing employee illness and absenteeism far outweigh the costs. Further, employee resistance can be overcome through careful education and open communication between hospital leadership and staff, as well as policies that permit certain reasonable exclusions and allow employees who cannot receive influenza

vaccination to wear masks when they are in the presence of patients during the influenza season.

## **AT ISSUE**

AHA members and staff spent time earlier this year discussing these issues in the context of the spring round of AHA Regional Policy Board meetings and with AHA's Committee on Health Professions. In April, taking into consideration the findings of these discussions, the AHA's Board of Trustees approved the following new AHA policy:

America's hospitals are committed to protecting the health and well-being of patients and staff. Evidence has emerged over the past few years clearly indicating that health care workers can unintentionally expose patients to seasonal influenza if they (the workers) have not been vaccinated, and such exposure can be dangerous to vulnerable patients.

To protect the lives and welfare of patients and employees, AHA supports mandatory patient safety policies that require either influenza vaccination or wearing a mask in the presence of patients across health care settings during flu season. The aim is to achieve the highest possible level of protection.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The AHA will hold three conference calls featuring speakers from hospitals that have implemented mandatory vaccination policies, with a focus on best practices for putting such policies into practice.

If your hospital has not implemented such a patient safety policy regarding influenza vaccination of health care workers, or if you are in the midst of trying to develop or implement such a policy, we encourage you to participate in one of these calls to learn more about the strategies and best practices used by hospitals that have put mandatory worker seasonal influenza vaccination policies into place.

These calls will be held at the following dates and times:

- Friday, July 29 at 1:00 p.m. EDT
- Tuesday, August 23 at 1:00 p.m. EDT
- Thursday, September 8 at 1:00 p.m. EDT

For more information and to register to participate, visit <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/HSDCC2K>.