A call for mandatory flu vaccinations

Flu vaccinations should be a condition of employment or privileges for all health care personnel, two infection control societies advocate.

Being vaccinated is a “professional and ethical responsibility” and not complying with a facility’s vaccination policy should not be tolerated, the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA) said in August.

The position was endorsed by the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA).

Last year, 39% of health care professionals said they had no intention of being vaccinated despite the concern about H1N1 flu, a RAND Corporation survey found.

“Health care providers are ethically obligated to take measures proven to keep patients from acquiring influenza in health care settings,” said SHEA’s president, Neil Fishman, MD.

The position applies to all health care personnel in all health care settings whether they have direct patient contact or not. It also applies to students, volunteers, and contract workers.

The only exemptions should be for medical reasons, such as allergy to eggs. SHEA does not support exceptions for religious, personal, or philosophical reasons, saying failure to be vaccinated is an unacceptable risk to patients and other personnel.

Last year’s flu season, one of the worst in the nation’s history, highlighted the need for stronger policies, especially in light of low vaccination rates, SHEA says.

Richard Whitley, MD, IDSA president, said: “Vaccination of health care personnel saves patients’ lives and reduces illness,” adding that it helps to keep workers from falling ill during flu outbreaks and missing work, which further affects patient care.

Dr Fishman called mandatory vaccination the “cornerstone” of a program to prevent spread of flu that also includes identification and isolation of infected patients, hand hygiene and cough etiquette, use of protective equipment, and restriction of ill workers and visitors in a facility.

SHEA notes that otherwise healthy adults, such as health care personnel, are routinely infected with the flu virus and are likely at increased risk because of their contact with infected patients. Infected personnel may shed virus before development of symptoms.

Several studies have shown that vaccinating personnel reduces patient mortality and absenteeism.

Mandates effective

Mandatory vaccination is the single most effective strategy to increase...
health care worker vaccination rates, achieving coverage of more than 95%, SHEA reports.

A number of organizations already have mandatory vaccination policies, including the Department of Defense; HCA, Hospital Corporation of America; BJC Healthcare in St Louis; and Maryland-based MedStar Health, with medical and religious exemptions. BJC’s vaccination rate was over 98% for its nearly 26,000 employees, with 8 terminated for failure to comply.

SHEA’s position paper is posted at www.shea-online.org