

Setting up and Running a Successful Flu Clinic

Physicians looking to increase their influenza vaccination rates—and bottom line—should take a page from Bloomingdale Medical Associates' flu clinic success.

Last October, the Riverview, FL, practice vaccinated more than a thousand patients in one five-hour clinic with a “mini fair” atmosphere.

Staff credit the clinic's success to being well-prepared, from having adequate parking and enough vaccine on hand to running an efficient process that doesn't require a doctor be present.

“This is a win-win situation because if it's done right you can get fairly reimbursed and it's good for patients,” said Jeffrey D. Wartman, FACP, one of five internists at the practice.

“Any way that immunization can be made more convenient, such as a flu clinic, is likely to improve immunization rates,” said Anthony Fiore, MD, a medical epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And patients? “They love [the clinic] because they're in and out in five or ten minutes,” Dr. Wartman said.

Planning for Success

If you're running a flu clinic for the first time, a key challenge is determining how many doses to have on hand. Carol Nicholas, the practice administrator who heads up Bloomingdale's clinic, suggests estimating on the basis of how many shots you gave the previous year and making the clinic appointment-only. Bloomingdale usually gives 3,000–3,500 shots per season and schedules at least 80 to 90 patients every 15 minutes on flu clinic day. A smaller practice could easily give 300 shots in a morning, she said.

To be safe, have more vaccinations than you think you'll need. You can use the extra during the rest of the season, and some suppliers may buy leftovers back or offer credit for returns, she said. Once you know how many shots you'll need, make sure you have enough refrigeration space. And don't start taking appointments until you actually have the vaccine in hand.

Another challenge is finding the right date to hold the clinic. Dr. Wartman suggests that your date should come before drugstores and supermarkets start offering their flu clinics. He holds his on October 7, “give or take a week,” and typically chooses a Saturday—avoiding holidays—from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. All employees are expected to work that day; instead of overtime pay, they get extra hours off during the same pay period.

Publicity Tips

If you run a flu clinic every year, you have built-in publicity. Here are other ways to get the word out:

- Start your publicity the summer before the clinic.
- Post signs in exam rooms, wait areas, bathrooms, and lobbies.
- Ask every patient who checks out whether they want a flu clinic appointment.
- Put a blurb announcing your date on the bottom of your patient statements.
- Add a note about your flu clinic in ads you place in local publications.
- Inspire your staff. Award a gift card to both the receptionist and assistant who schedule the most patients for the clinic.

Over-ordering is not a problem. Most manufacturers and suppliers have vaccine credit or buy-back programs.

The Big Day

On the day of the clinic, Bloomingdale Medical's clinical and reception staff meet at 7:30 a.m. to have breakfast and a pep talk and to hand out prizes. Around 8 a.m., medical records and billing staff arrive.

Two clinical staff with prefilled syringes meet handicapped patients at their cars to deliver the shot. All other patients go through the following five steps:

1. They are greeted by a reception staff member who gives them an encounter form.
2. They take the form to the front door, where Ms. Nicholas greets them and gives them a clipboard with a pen and a consent form to sign.
3. A clinical employee takes their temperature and asks about egg allergies.
4. They go to one of six waiting clinical staff for the immunization.
5. They proceed down the hall to the “mini fair,” complete with vendors, snacks, orange juice, and balloons.

As the crowd diminishes, staff start breaking down the clinic. Billing staff stay an extra hour to finish updating charts and posting charges that they will transmit on Monday. A cleaning service comes later, and two receptionists come in early Monday and finish the clean-up. By the time the office is ready to open, everything is back to normal.

Although the flu clinic reaches a lot of patients, the practice holds mini flu clinics two afternoons per week on an appointment basis in October and November and provides immunization as needed through the month of March.

If all this sounds overwhelming for the first-timer, Ms. Nicholas emphasized that it gets easier once you get the hang of it. “After the first year it was a cakewalk,” she said.

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