

Getting the Message Out about Vaccination of Health Care Workers

When Trish M. Perl, MD, rolls up her sleeve each year to get her influenza vaccine, she does it in front of her residents during grand rounds at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. Her goals are not only to stay healthy and keep her patients healthy, but also to show leadership on health care worker vaccination.

“It sends a powerful message that [Hopkins] thinks vaccination is important,” she said. “One year I got vaccinated three times.”

Almost all of her residents now get vaccinated; however, many other workers—including nurses and administrative staff—still hold out despite recent studies that show that vaccinating health care workers can decrease patient mortality, reduce length of stay, improve worker productivity, and decrease worker absenteeism. In fact, only 42% of all health care workers get vaccinated, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dr. Perl, professor of medicine, pathology, and epidemiology, noted that those who do not get vaccinated cite a variety of reasons: they don’t know why it’s important, they think the vaccine will give you the flu, or they believe they don’t get the flu and therefore don’t need to get it.

“The vast majority of people who get the flu tend to be mildly symptomatic so they may not even know they have it,” Dr. Perl said. “It becomes an unrecognized infection that is transmitted to a vulnerable patient.”

Making the case

The first step in making the case for the vaccine to reluctant health care workers, according to Dr. Perl, is to show the data that proves how common influenza is, how it’s transmitted, how many health care workers get it, and what percentage don’t even know they’ve had it.

Then show data about its morbidity and mortality followed by data from clinical trials that show how healthcare worker vaccination improves that result. Finally, appeal to the idea of doing no harm.

But, she acknowledged, that’s not always enough.

For those workers who say “I’ve never gotten the influenza vaccine before, it’s my right not to get it,”—which at times has included older doctors—she unabashedly tries bribery, such as a gift card to Starbuck’s, and punishment,

by using a green badge holder to indicate a vaccinated worker versus a clear one to indicate a nonvaccinated worker. Those without the green holder have to wear a mask when they’re within three feet of any patient.

“I can look at my team, see the badges, and say, ‘run and get your vaccine and we’ll see you in a few minutes,’” she said.

If that still doesn’t work, she said she doesn’t hesitate to do a little arm-twisting, including personally taking workers to get their vaccine or calling their bosses to make it happen.

Spreading the word

Getting the word out can be one of the most challenging aspects of vaccinating health care workers, even the ones who want to do it. Moreover, providing vaccination in an accessible way is part of the Joint Commission’s infection prevention and control standard relating to the influenza vaccine. Here are some tips from Dr. Perl:

- Use carts to make it convenient to get the vaccine.
- Select a team member to be the certified vaccinator on the unit.
- Bring the vaccine to grand rounds and required meetings.
- Recognize that some people are truly afraid of needles; make the inhaled version available.
- Use posters, reminders, signs in the bathroom, and e-mail notes to advertise the vaccine.

Looking ahead

It’s possible that there might be one more tool this year to increase health care worker vaccination rates: the H1N1 vaccine. Not only may that draw more people in to get the shots in general, but Dr. Perl said she advocates not giving the H1N1 vaccine—assuming it’s available in the fall—to any worker unless that person also gets the seasonal influenza vaccine.

For now, some institutions have taken the next step by making the vaccine mandatory. But for most offices and institutions, she said it’s critical for all physicians to take a leadership role to help create a culture of acceptance.

She said she likes to note that whereas car seats are ubiquitous now, at one time they weren’t mandatory. “That’s where we are—the infancy of trying to change the culture about vaccines,” she said.