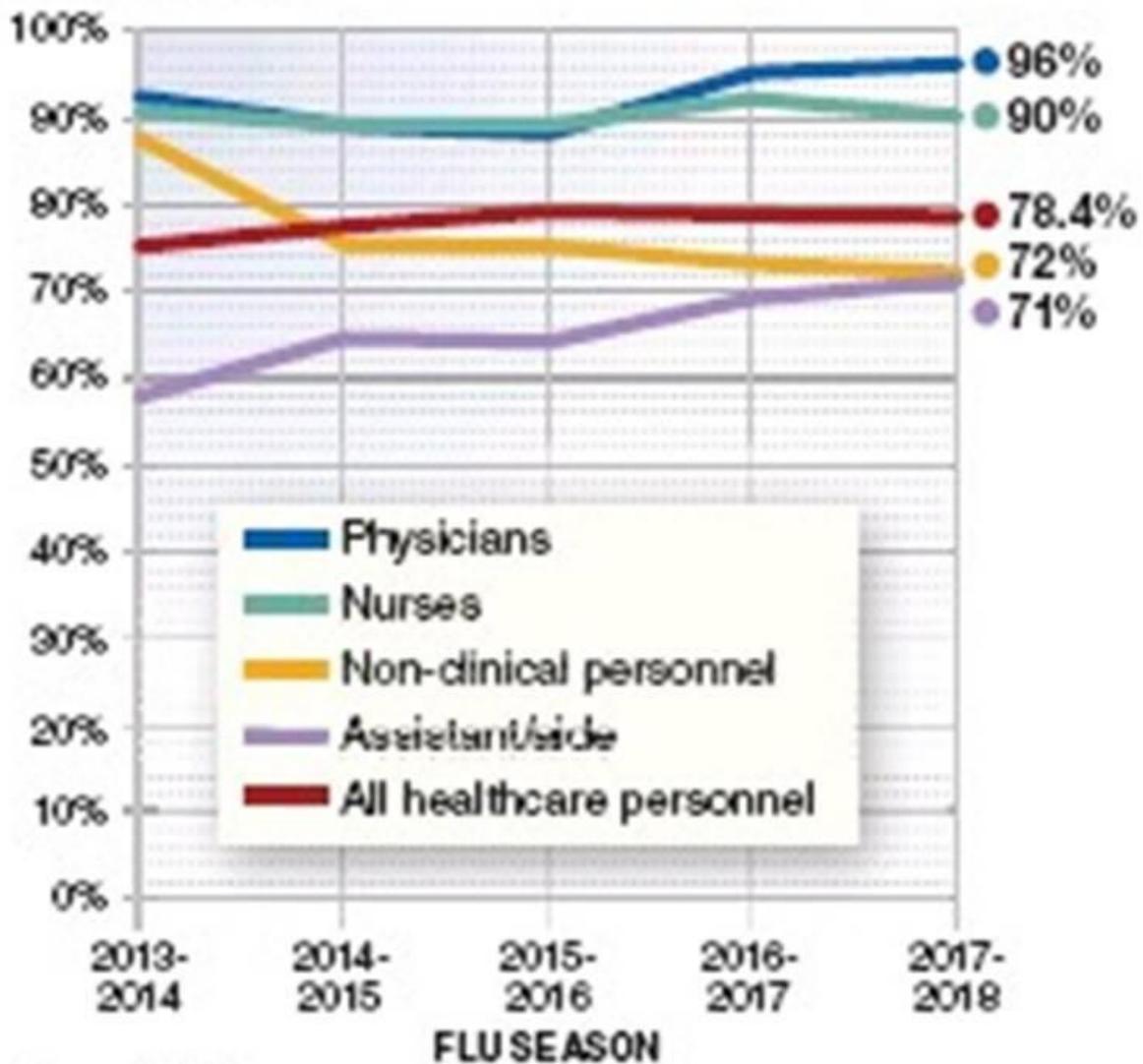


Long-term care providers adopting mandates to increase workforce flu vaccination rates

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Percentage of health professionals vaccinated, by occupation



Just as the severity of the flu varies from one season to the next, so too have vaccination rates among healthcare professionals over the past decade.

Coverage rates among healthcare personnel only started increasing steadily over the past five years as the industry more forcefully stressed the importance of prevention among its workforce.

One constant however is that the highest vaccination rates can be found among hospital workers, at above 80% since 2010, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Consistently at the other end of the spectrum have been healthcare personnel in long-term care facilities such as nursing homes, where staff vaccination rates have been the lowest among all healthcare professionals at under 70%.

That disparity was well known to Deborah Visconi in 2017 when she became CEO of Bergen New Bridge Medical Center in Paramus, N.J.; it's the largest hospital in the state by beds and has 2,200 employees as well as the state's largest licensed nursing home.

Immediately after taking over, Visconi launched a campaign aimed at raising the New Bridge workforce's 40% vaccination rate. "My mission was that we want to protect the health and well-being of our staff, and we want to protect the health and well-being of our patients and residents," Visconi said. "This is one of those things that's almost a no-brainer."

During the 2017-18 flu season the vaccination rate for New Bridge staffers hit 60%, and then reached 90% compliance for the current flu season, higher than the average of around 84% among New Jersey providers.

Visconi said she began the campaign by reaching out to all seven labor unions representing New Bridge employees and urged them to partner with her on developing a strategy that included offering prizes to departments that were first in getting all their employees vaccinated.

"I would walk around and make rounds, and if somebody didn't have a flu shot I would talk to them and ask them why to try and alleviate their concerns or answer their questions," Visconi said. "I wanted to approach this by using the silk glove instead of the stick."

Those who choose not to get a flu shot are required to wear a mask. Visconi feels her approach helps employees to view it as more than a requirement of the job but rather part of a culture change that prioritizes engagement and accountability.

During the 2017-18 flu season, vaccination coverage was 94% among healthcare personnel working in settings where vaccination was required. Yet only 44% of healthcare personnel reported having a requirement to get vaccinated, according to the CDC, with

such policies most common in hospitals, at 68%, while only 29% of those working in long-term care facilities reported such requirements.

But like New Bridge, the concept of flu vaccination requirements has begun to catch on among long-term care providers seeking to reverse the trend of low flu vaccination among their workforce.

Kennett Square, Pa.-based Genesis HealthCare, with 400 skilled-nursing centers in 29 states, was one of that industry's early adopters of mandatory flu vaccinations. The company imposed its policy five years ago requiring all care staff to either get a flu shot or wear a mask—with no exceptions.

“We deliberately decided not to get into any sort of evaluation of people's reasons for declining to be vaccinated,” said JoAnne Reifsnyder, executive vice president and chief nursing officer at Genesis. “We don't ask—whatever the reason is, that's up to them.”