

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Health Care Worker Immunization

Ministry of Health - Government Communications & Public Engagement

(updated July 27, 2012)

Subject:

In support of health authorities' influenza prevention strategy, the public health professionals at the Ministry of Health and the health authorities, in collaboration with the Health Employers Association of BC, are implementing a health care worker influenza (flu) vaccination program for the 2012 flu season. All staff (including nurses and physicians), contracted staff, students and volunteers who work in areas where patients could be present will be required to get the flu shot each year, or will need to wear face masks for the duration of the flu season.

This policy complements other aspects of the influenza prevention strategy, such as hand washing and staying home when sick.

Background/Context/Environmental scan:

Health care workers are one of the most common sources of flu transmission to patients in health care settings, and their patients are often the most vulnerable to serious consequences as a result of illness. Leadership Council has therefore decided to move forward with this influenza vaccination program as a patient safety and quality issue.

Traditionally, health care workers have had relatively low flu vaccination rates (less than 50 per cent). Since flu transmission happens prior to the appearance of flu symptoms, this causes workers to infect patients unknowingly every year. Influenza has by far the highest rates of mortality among vaccine-preventable diseases, and hospitalized patients are more vulnerable to influenza than members of the general population.

British Columbia will be the first Canadian jurisdiction to implement a wide-scale mandatory "immunize or mask" program; however, it has been rolled out in several jurisdictions and facilities in the United States. To get a sense of the challenges and best practices of implementing a program like this, representatives from B.C. have done extensive research on these programs and visited several sites. In addition to being a quality and safety issue it has proven to be cost saving as well. One study in a health care setting showed absenteeism related to respiratory disease reduced by 28%. No other method of encouraging vaccine uptake worked as well to improve vaccination rates among health care workers.

This program will begin implementation with the start of the flu vaccine season – typically around Thanksgiving each year. However, it will need to be announced prior to that, to allow health authorities to begin the necessary preparatory work.

Purpose:

To communicate to British Columbians that the Province and health authorities are making the safety of patients a priority by implementing this province-wide health care worker immunization policy. It will also be important to communicate that this policy is simply one facet of the overall influenza reduction plan, and is important to reducing patient illness and potential death.

Goals/Objectives:

- To communicate to the public that this policy change is taking place, and will better protect patients from potentially serious complications from flu.
- To show the importance of the vaccination policy by highlighting traditionally low vaccination uptake by health care workers.
- To encourage health care worker unions to support this policy as a way to improve overall patient safety.
- To explain what groups are at increased risk for complications as a result of flu.
- To increase vaccine uptake by those at high risk for complications in the general population

Potential Challenges:

- Each year, it is challenging to get vaccine uptake rates higher than 50 per cent – this may demonstrate that there is significant misinformation about the flu vaccine and how prevalent transmission is between staff and patients.
- This could be seen as mandatory vaccination and an affront to personal freedoms – in fact, workers are given the option to vaccinate or wear a mask.
- Criticisms that the flu vaccine is not 100 per cent effective, so could call into question the efficacy of the policy.
- Criticism that the Province should offer free flu vaccine to the entire population.
- Difficulty of enforcement.
- This policy is not extending to hospital visitors – could be questioned about why visitors do not have to abide by the same policy since they could potentially also transmit the virus.

Key Audiences:**Primary:**

- Media
- Public
- Health-related unions including: BC Nurses Union/Hospital Employees' Union/Health Sciences Association of BC/Canadian Union of Public Employees/B.C. Government and Service Employees Union
- Health authority employees
- Public health clinics/professionals
- Health care volunteers

Secondary:

- HEABC
- BC Medical Association
- Post-secondary institutions (who may have students working in health care settings)

Messaging:

- Each year, influenza causes serious complications – including death – for many British Columbians, and patients at health care and long-term care facilities are among the hardest hit.
- That is why, to support our comprehensive influenza prevention strategy, this year we are requiring all health care workers to take additional steps to protect their patients from flu.
- All health care workers who come into contact with patients at health and long-term care facilities will be required to get the influenza vaccine, or wear a face mask during flu season.
- The flu can cause serious illness in those most at risk – including seniors, people with compromised immune systems, respiratory illnesses or a variety of other underlying causes. In other words: many of our patients and long-term care residents.
- These patients should not have to worry about contracting the flu from their caregivers – currently a common mode of flu infection in these facilities.
- The flu vaccine is safe and effective – when used in conjunction with other infection control practices, such as hand washing and remaining home when sick – it is extremely effective at preventing illness.
- Those who are unable to vaccinate, or who choose not to, they will be required to wear a face mask to prevent transmission.
- We are committed to reducing influenza rates at our health care and long term care facilities. This policy will help save lives.

Strategic Approach:

HEABC will communicate with the health care unions about this policy in early August. Recognizing that the unions represent a key interest in this policy change, every effort will be made to get them on-side and supportive of the policy, and they will be integral to the successful roll-out.

Shortly after that communication, a letter will go out to health authority staff from CEOs/MHOs, informing them of the policy change, and providing them with information about why we are making this change, as well as letting them know that additional information will be forthcoming in the coming weeks (will link to a public QA hosted on the BCCDC ImmunizeBC website, as well as individual HA intranets). Very shortly after that, the Ministry of Health will release a public news release, announcing the policy to the public and allowing the Province to frame the policy appropriately, as a patient safety initiative.

Key spokespeople will be Dr. Doug Cochrane, chair of the BC Patient Safety and Quality Council, and Dr. Perry Kendall, Provincial Health Officer (depending on timing – Dr. Kendall is away until August 13).

Should announcement be rolled out prior to his return, additional spokesperson could be Dr. Bonnie Henry at BCCDC).

Materials:

- News release
- Issues note
- QA – Internal
- Video of Dr. Kendall outlining the policy and explaining why it is important
- Letter to employees from HA CEOs
- Public QA for health care workers

DETAILED ROLL-OUT TIMELINE

(This is tactical roll-out and should be done in as much detail as possible.)

Date	Action	Description	Responsibility	Audience
Aug 1	HEABC meets with unions	HEABC CEO Michael Marchbank will meet with unions explaining that this policy is being seriously considered for implementation this year.	HEABC/Michael Marchbank	Major health unions: BCNU, HEU, BCGEU, HSA, Residents Association
Aug 7	Letter to unions	Formal letter outlining implementation of the policy	HEABC	Major health unions: BCNU, HEU, BCGEU, HSA, Residents Association
Aug 8 -- morning	Letter to all staff from HA CEOs	Formal letter outlining the HAs commitment to the policy, and providing a place to go for more information	HAs	All health authority staff
Aug 8	Staff QA posted to Immunize BC website, health authority intranets	Staff QA posted to Immunize BC website (http://immunizebc.ca/healthcare-professionals) Health authorities will be able to post to their own intranets as well, or link to the Immunize BC page.	Immunize BC, Health authority communications	Health care workers
Aug 8 -- afternoon	Ministry news release	News release goes out explaining the policy change	MoH GCPE/Laura N.	Public, media
Week of Aug	Follow up	Dr. Henry and/or Dr. Cochrane	BCCDC, MOH	Media,

8	interviews	available to reply to media requests	GCPE, BC PSCQC	public
Sept	Video of Dr Kendall	Video to be posted to Immunize BC site and HA sites of Dr. Kendall explaining the policy, how effective and safe vaccine is, and encouraging staff to vaccinate	MoH GCPE/GCPE HQ/PHO	Public, health care workers
Sept	Communicating with staff	Health authorities reach out to employees/volunteers with QA sessions, informational posters	Health authorities	Staff
Week of Oct 8	Flu vaccine campaign kicks off	News release announcing start of flu vaccine campaign, outlining who gets free vaccine, pointing people to flu clinic locator	GCPE	
First week of December	Official start of flu season	All staff should now be vaccinated, or be wearing masks		
Throughout flu season	Posters/public communication in health facilities	These should explain briefly that the policy is in effect, and that is why some staff will be wearing masks		
Late March/Early April (at public health discretion)	Conclusion of traditional flu season			

Sign-off:

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