

Influenza Vaccination among Healthcare Workers Deserves a Higher Priority

Sabine Wicker

Occupational Health Service, Head of department, Hospital of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University, Germany

Seasonal influenza continues to be an important source of morbidity and mortality, annual epidemics result in approximately three to five million cases of severe illness, and about 250 000 to 500 000 deaths [1]. Influenza vaccination of healthcare workers (HCWs) is a critically important step to substantially reduce healthcare associated influenza infections [2]. Despite decades of effort to encourage HCWs to be immunized against influenza, vaccination levels remain insufficient in Europe, with only about 4%-40% coverage rates being achieved. The current low rate of influenza vaccination uptake among European HCWs shows no significant sign of improving despite numerous measures to increase these rates (e.g. vaccination campaigns, education, a recent pandemic).

Over the past years many healthcare facilities in the United States have implemented mandatory policies with all of them achieving nearly 100% compliance. Numerous professional societies call for mandatory flu vaccination for HCWs (e.g. Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America) [3].

What should we do now in Europe?

In all likelihood, education alone will not lead to sufficient and sustained increases in vaccination rates among HCWs. The repeated lesson is that until rules are put into place requiring vaccination, HCWs do not, of their own accord, achieve sufficient rates of vaccination [4]. Influenza vaccination rates of 90% or higher are needed to lead to a significant impact on transmission of influenza by HCWs [5].

Abandonment is not an option; the healthcare systems in Europe will have to define the strategy for reaching sufficient influenza

vaccination rates. Now the time has come to put patient safety and quality of care over the reluctance of HCWs to get vaccinated against influenza. Europe-wide standardized vaccination policies ought to be considered.

Influenza season approaches and the mounting evidence regarding nosocomial influenza calls for a statement that influenza vaccination should be considered an ethical responsibility and patient safety issue [5,6].

In a recently published essay Thomas R. Talbot wrote: "Would you rather have an unvaccinated or vaccinated HCW care for you, your loved ones, or you friends in the hospital?" Everyone ought to consider this question.

References

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Corresponding author: Sabine Wicker MD, PhD, Occupational Health Service, Head of department, Hospital of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University, Theodor-Stern-Kai 7, 60590 Frankfurt am Main, Germany, Tel: 4969-63014511; Fax: +4969-63016385; E-mail: Sabine.Wicker@kgu.de

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