

INFLUENZA VACCINE STANDARD INTRODUCED BY JCAHO *by Dave Gourley RRT*



You can't pick up a newspaper or turn on the television these days without reading or hearing some discussion of influenza. Certainly the emergence of avian influenza, or bird flu, has caused much discussion amongst public health officials and healthcare providers. Due to the threat of a worldwide pandemic as a result of the flu, much more attention is being paid to influenza. JCAHO is the latest organization to address the issue of influenza.

The Joint Commission announced in mid-June that they have approved a new infection control standard to address influenza vaccines for staff. The new standard, which will be effective on January 1, 2007, requires accredited organizations to offer influenza vaccinations to staff. According to JCAHO, staff includes volunteers and licensed independent practitioners with close patient contact. The new standard will be required for the Hospital, including Critical Access Hospital, and Long Term Care accreditation programs. This is not a requirement for the other JCAHO programs, such as home care, ambulatory care, and behavioral health.

Robert Wise, MD, VP, Division of Standards and Survey Methods at JCAHO is quoted as saying, "Preventing the spread of the flu protects patients and saves lives. Encouraging health care workers to be vaccinated can play a vital role in stopping the transmission of this potentially fatal infection."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has made the reduction of influenza transmission from health care professionals to patients a top priority in the United States. The Joint Commission developed the standard in response to the CDC recommendations. The CDC actually has urged annual influenza vaccination for health care workers for the past twenty five years. Earlier this year, the CDC's "Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report" called for stronger steps to increase influenza vaccination of health care workers. Despite the recommendations, the vaccination rates as measured by the CDC remain low. According to the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC) and JCAHO, approximately 36% of healthcare workers receive flu vaccinations annually. Both APIC and the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA) support the initiative to improve healthcare worker influenza vaccination rates.

National studies, including CDC and APIC data, show that influenza causes an average of 36,000 deaths and over 200,000 hospitalizations on average in the United States annually. Healthcare workers are at high risk for acquiring influenza infection due to their exposure to ill patients, in addition to their exposure in the community. Furthermore, health care-associated transmission of influenza has been documented among many patient populations in a variety of clinical settings, and infections have been linked epidemiologically to unvaccinated health care workers. This can be a key source of institutional outbreaks, leading to increased morbidity and mortality among patients.

The new Joint Commission standard requires organizations to:

- Establish an annual influenza vaccination program that includes at least staff and licensed independent practitioners
- Provide access to influenza vaccinations on-site
- Educate staff and licensed independent practitioners about flu vaccination; non-vaccine control measures (such as the use of appropriate precautions); and diagnosis, transmission and potential impact of influenza;
- Annually evaluate vaccination rates and reasons for non-participation in the organization's immunization program
- Implement enhancements to the program to increase participation.

This new standard is expected to place greater emphasis on improving immunization rates among healthcare workers to ensure patient safety and protection, especially in the population of patients at increased risk for influenza related complications. Improving the immunization rate will also benefit the hospitals, since it provides protection to the healthcare worker and will minimize absenteeism during the busy influenza season.

APIC released a position paper entitled "Improving Healthcare Worker Influenza Immunization Rates" in 2004. This is an excellent tool to assist healthcare organizations in complying with this new standard. The position paper may be obtained on the APIC website at www.apic.org.

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