Health Care Field Not Immune to Vaccine Myths

BY BETSY BATES

Health care workers harbor significant fears and misconceptions about influenza vaccination, according to the results of a survey conducted at a large tertiary children's hospital in the Midwestern United States.

Researchers in Kansas City, Mo., administered a 44-question survey to 63 physicians, 135 nurses, and 376 allied health care workers at a 317-bed children's hospital where rates of seasonal influenza immunization are high, Dr. Mary Anne Jackson said at a press conference during the annual meeting of the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA).

Results of the study were "somewhat surprising" for a highly educated, highly immunized group of health care workers who are known to be at high risk of acquiring seasonal influenza and passing it on to vulnerable patients, said Dr. Jackson, chief of infectious diseases at Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City.

She pointed to "significant gaps in knowledge" about transmission, nosocomial spread, and vaccine efficacy and safety among all levels of health care professionals. Accurate knowledge "wasn't 100% even for physicians," she said.

Still, physicians were significantly more likely than nurses or other health care workers (*P* value less than .0001) to know that they are at high risk of influenza; that the vaccine prevents spread of the disease; and that it is a safe vaccine for adults and children.

Compared with physicians, other health care workers were significantly more likely to erroneously believe that the vaccine can cause influenza.

About 75% of physicians advocated policies mandating influenza immunization among health care workers, compared with fewer than half of nurses or allied health care professionals surveyed.

Mandating influenza immunization for health care workers, a highly controversial proposition briefly enacted in New York State in response to the H1N1 influenza pandemic this year, was rescinded by New York Gov. David A. Paterson. The governor's office stated that the mandatory vaccination policy for health care workers was dropped due to shortages of vaccine for high-risk populations. Widespread protests, however, were speculated to have played a role in the decision as well.

There are 'gaps in knowledge' about transmission, nosocomial spread, and vaccine efficacy.

DR. JACKSON

Based on her study findings and recent public responses to H1N1 vaccine mandates for health care workers, Dr. Jackson concluded that "mandates are going to be difficult."

On the other hand, educational efforts and campaigns aimed at getting health care workers immunized "have failed dismally in most institutions."

At Children's Mercy Hospital, a vigorous campaign conducted over several years finally achieved an 85% influenza vaccine rate among employees, compared with an average 40% rate among health care workers across the country.

Dr. Jackson reported no relevant financial disclosures. ■

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