

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: California Health Care Workers Divided Over
Flu Vaccine Requirements for Hospital Staff

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I'm Kenny Goldberg, with a look at some of the challenges to raising the influenza vaccination rate of health care workers in California hospitals.

This is a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation.

As an emergency department doctor at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, Shawn Evans gets a lot of face time with the flu.

Evans says during the flu season, he's in close contact with someone who could make him sick five or six times a day.

(Evans): "I would say on an average day, maybe 10% of our patients have a viral syndrome, and we're right up front with those patients -- examining them and making sure that their health and well-being are managed. And those are the folks that can transmit to us."

Evans says there's another good reason why he gets a flu shot every year.

(Evans): "I can co-infect other people. So I can actually aggravate transmission to patients, I can cause death and harm to people, and I work in an environment where other people rely on me to be healthy, so I don't transmit it to them."

Linda Good is director of employee health for the Scripps system, which includes five hospitals and some 13,000 workers. Good says Scripps has decided not to make the flu vaccine mandatory.

(Good): "We offer it to everyone, we make it easier for them to get it free-of-charge, multiple options of how to get it, but we do leave it up to them to make the choice and decision whether they're going to take it."

But when it comes to getting more health care workers vaccinated against the flu, the personal choice approach may not be effective.

The California Department of Public Health estimates that only 60% of California's hospital-based health care workers were vaccinated during the 2010 to 2011 flu season.

Jan Emerson-Shea, vice president of the California Hospital Association, says that's just not good enough.

(Emerson-Shea): "The goal I believe the state has set is 90% by 2020, and we are in full support of that goal. But in order to achieve that, we really believe that we have to have the requirement in place, that requires employees to be vaccinated."

Fifteen states have such a requirement for health care workers. But not California.

Last September, Gov. Jerry Brown (D) vetoed a bill that would have mandated health care facilities to attain a 90% flu vaccination rate by 2015.

The powerful California Nurses Association was against the mandate.

The 85,000-member organization was opposed to the stipulation that providers had to get vaccinated or wear a mask. When the mask requirement was removed, the group still declined to support the final bill.

CNA co-president Zenei Cortez says for nurses, flu shots should always be an individual choice.

(Cortez): "Because we know our bodies, we know our health history. And we have that professional responsibility that if we are sick, we should not be coming to work. We should be protecting our patients. So we should not all be forced to take the flu shot."

Scripps' Shawn Evans thinks that's a specious argument. He points out in the early stages of the flu, someone might not know they're sick.

(Evans): "You could actually have it, and be with minimal symptoms, or a slight cough, and maybe even a runny nose, maybe just a little bit of fatigue, and you're going to transmit it to other people."

What's more, Evans says hospitals put a lot of effort into making sure they're adequately staffed. If there's a major flu outbreak and some of the health care staff is unvaccinated, a hospital is just asking for trouble.

(Evans): "What happens if 20% of that workforce becomes ill? That can be a devastating environment in health care. It can be devastating to the team. And so really, this is about teamwork, and people needing to keep themselves healthy, and keeping themselves"

vaccinated, so they don't fall prey to a perfectly predictable circumstance whereby they put their teammates at risk."

There's no word on whether California lawmakers will consider another bill to mandate the flu shot. In the meantime, some county health departments, including San Francisco and Alameda, have issued their own mandates.

But county health officials concede compliance will be left up to individual hospitals.

The California Hospital Association's Jan Emerson-Shea says this kind of piecemeal approach doesn't cut it.

She believes getting vaccinated against the flu is a professional responsibility for all health care workers. Emerson-Shea says providers need to keep in mind one of the fundamental principles of their business.

(Emerson-Shea): "First and foremost, our job is to make sure that the patients who are in our care are safe, and that includes making sure that we don't pass preventable illnesses to them."

This has been a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation.

If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Kenny Goldberg. Thanks for listening.