

Ministry of Health position statement - addressing influenza immunisation of healthcare workers – March 2018

Position

The Ministry recommends annual influenza immunisation of healthcare workers and calls for all healthcare workers, allied health and other health sector workers, and their employers to protect themselves, their colleagues, their patients and the community from influenza by being vaccinated.

From 2018, the Ministry has introduced a goal of 80 percent of all healthcare workers to be immunised annually against influenza. Achieving influenza immunisation coverage of 80 percent is sufficient to establish herd immunity against most influenza viruses¹.

Good infection control practices, including hand hygiene and respiratory/cough etiquette must be adopted by all staff. The influenza vaccine will not provide protection until at least two weeks after vaccination. During the influenza season, to protect patients most at risk (e.g. the very young, the elderly and those who are immune compromised) from the complications of influenza all staff should consider wearing a mask appropriate to the task i.e. a surgical or N95/P2 mask, when dealing with these individuals.

Background

Influenza is a significant public health issue in New Zealand. Each year, this serious disease has a significant impact on our communities. Influenza also has a financial impact, particularly in workplaces, and can potentially overwhelm both primary care and hospital services during winter epidemics.

Healthcare workers can transmit influenza without knowing they are infected. The Southern Hemisphere Influenza Vaccine Effectiveness, Research and Surveillance Study (SHIVERS) 2015 serosurvey showed that 1 out of 4 New Zealanders are infected with influenza each year, and that around 80 percent of those infected are asymptomatic². An asymptomatic carrier can unknowingly expose their family, co-workers and patients to the influenza virus without realising.

Healthcare workers because of the nature of their work are at high risk from influenza and twice as likely to acquire influenza compared to non-healthcare workers³. Healthcare workers have a professional responsibility to protect their vulnerable patients from influenza. Annual influenza vaccination of healthcare workers is likely to reduce illness among the patients they care for^{4,5,6}.

The World Health Organization, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, and the New Zealand Immunisation Handbook strongly recommend annual influenza immunisation for Healthcare Workers.

DHBs should make every effort to increase their healthcare worker influenza immunisation coverage rates as many remain suboptimal. In 2017, National DHB Healthcare Worker Influenza Coverage was 66 percent, with individual DHBs ranging from 51 percent to 84 percent⁷.

References

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