Joint Commission Issues Flu Challenge
Program challenges hospitals to increase vaccination rates among workers.

By Caitlin Maloney

Joint Commission Resources (JCR), an organization which helps improve quality of care and patient safety for healthcare facilities, is kicking off the second annual Flu Vaccination Challenge. The program challenges hospitals and other healthcare facilities to increase influenza vaccination rates among workers.

The Flu Vaccination Challenge will run until March. Stephen Weber, MD, JCR consultant and medical director of infection control and clinical quality at the University of Chicago Medical Center, said the duration of flu season is never really the same, especially in different areas of the country. "Flu season tends to go later then people think," he said. "So continuing to drive this point home later in the flu season is a really good idea."

Improving on Standards
The challenge, which began in 2008, was developed after a CDC report listed the national average of flu vaccination rates for healthcare workers at 42 percent. "We took that and said OK, that is the average and that means about half are below, so we are challenging them to reach the average," William Schaffner, MD, chairman, Department of Preventative Medicine and professor of infectious disease at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, TN, said.

The flu results in more than 200,000 hospitalizations and 36,000 deaths in the U.S. each year, according to a JCR press release. As a result, all healthcare workers are encouraged to be vaccinated because unvaccinated workers could increase the spread of flu to patients, leading to serious health risks and even death. "When you see the inconvenience of the flu and the people that end up in the ICU and unfortunately die with this, you can see the challenge is a way to help," Dr. Weber said.

Dr. Schaffner said the main reason for promoting the challenge is because the flu is a patient safety issue and staying healthy is part of the profession. Healthcare workers should not transmit flu infections to patients but also must stay healthy during an influenza outbreak to provide good medical care to patients. "I believe it is not only a professional obligation but also an ethical obligation for every healthcare worker to get vaccinated," he said.

In 2008, the challenge encouraged hospitals nationwide to reach a rate higher then the national average. During the inaugural year, 1,700 hospitals, at least one hospital from each state, participated in the challenge. All together, 1.1 million healthcare workers were vaccinated; 94 percent of the hospitals met the challenge by meeting a vaccination rate of 43 percent or more; and 78 percent increased their flu vaccination rate from the previous year. Overall, the number of healthcare workers vaccinated increased 14 percent, according to the JCR press release.

"Last year's results were really impressive to see that broad of an adoption," he said. "But like any other program, everyone wants to see improvement. We are striving for higher and higher numbers."

This year, Dr. Schaffner said the challenge is expanding to allow all healthcare facilities to participate, including hospitals, long term care and ambulatory care facilities. The expectations are also increasing. "We are raising the bar," he said.

Go for the Gold
The 2009 Flu Vaccination Challenge will have three compliance levels, 65 percent, 75 percent and 90 percent. Dr. Schaffner refers to them as the Olympic bronze, silver and gold medals. "There are [hospitals] that have reached the top rank, so we know these levels are achievable if everyone really buckles down and puts attention to it," he said. "We would not have selected those goals if they were out of reach."

The different levels give each hospital or facility a target to reach in their own perspective and to approach the challenge not just as a one-time competition but a commitment to move forward, Dr. Weber said. "What I really like about the program this year is it allows them to strive year by year," he said. "It tailors the goal to where they are right now, but keeps that long term goal of reaching 90 percent."

Safety and health are enough for many hospitals to strive for a high level, but Dr. Weber said there will also be recognition for each hospital that reaches each level. "I think that kind of public designation is something the hospitals can share with the staff and, more importantly, their patients," he said. "It's also saying we are engaged in this kind of program and this kind of work and does inspire patients."

There are several tips Dr. Schaffner suggests for a facility to be successful in the Flu Vaccination Challenge. The first and most important is for
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Senior leadership to embrace and be visual and vocal about the patient safety issue and achieving the vaccination goal. Resources for vaccinations must also be in place without cost, at convenience and within the facility. He reminds facilities to consider the night shift, part-time, weekend and volunteer workers as well.

Employee Resistance

Even if vaccinations are convenient, 40 percent of healthcare workers are still not getting their flu shots and 37 percent of all healthcare workers at the hospitals participating in the challenge in 2008 were not vaccinated, according to the JCR press release.

There is a short list of why a healthcare worker may not want to be vaccinated, Dr. Schaffner said. The same sort of concerns people have in the general public hold true for people in the healthcare field, though largely these concerns are misplaced, Dr. Weber said. One reason is the common myth that the vaccination can actually cause the person to get the flu itself. "That just doesn't happen," Dr. Weber said. "The vaccination isn't even a weakened form of the virus."

Many healthcare workers say they do not need the vaccination because they will stay home when they are sick, so they don't spread the flu. Yet many of those responders still come to work and forget the biological factor. "Mainly if I am exposed to influenza, in 2 to 3 days I am going to get sick myself," Dr. Schaffner said. "But the day before I become ill, I am already excreting the influenza virus to patients even though I feel completely healthy." Staying home while sick is not sufficient enough, the only way to avoid the spread of the flu is through vaccination, he said.

Other reasons include not having enough time, not knowing about the vaccination location or the simple fear of getting shots. However, Dr. Schaffner noted nasal sprays forms are now available and work just as well as injected vaccinations.

The main thing healthcare workers need to understand is the vaccination is a patient safety issue not just a personal issue, Dr. Schaffner said. "None of [the excuses] hold water or are sufficient," he said. "If your situation makes it available and makes it free and convenient, you really should be vaccinated and we should all be up there to 90 percent."

This year, JCR is also suggesting all hospital or facility personnel are vaccinated, including healthcare workers, patients records employees, and even cleaning and cooking staff. "Once you enter the healthcare environment, you should be in a protected cocoon of individuals who can't give you the virus and will protect you from getting it," Dr. Schaffner said.

Many in the healthcare industry are discussing the possibility of mandatory vaccinations, Dr. Weber said. However, hospitals and providers must first encourage vaccination before making it mandatory. "We need to make every effort short of mandatory vaccination," he said. "The challenge is a really good way for institutions to commit and healthcare workers to be brought to the floor."

Dr. Schaffner said the Flu Vaccination Challenge does not promote or get involved in mandatory vaccination, but does promote compliance with drug commission suggestions. "I just hope that by whatever means, we could all get over 90 percent and get up to gold in the Flu Vaccination Challenge," he said.

Caitlin Maloney is a former ADVANCE intern.