

9-30-11 A Flu Shot for You?

Each year, as summer ends, I hope for a “good” year for the flu and flu vaccine. Something seems to go wrong with so many of our influenza prevention clinics. Sometimes there wasn’t enough of the supply, so we had to carefully prioritize. The first year that I dealt with that problem, I switched the location to a church where we could have easier access and lots of room for sitting, filling out forms and waiting. I even set up a table with coffee, tea and cookies. There were still complaints, though, as it was taking so long to help people with their paperwork. The administrative assistant at the time, Sandy, and I finally went to talk to the nurses. While they were waiting in a classroom for the next “patients”, Sandy and I were dealing people who were losing their patience. We told them, “Some of you have to get out there and help us! Checking the ID’s and insurance information is taking too long!”

Since we had never dealt with this situation before, we just did what made sense to us at the time. We had a numbered sign-in sheet of names, we divided it up, with five or so names each and started calling out names and numbers. Now that we had five people instead of two, we figured we’d move right along! Now, keep in mind that doing the best we could with this shift in plans meant that five women were calling out from five different sets of numbers, all right next to each other. Well, you’d think that I was calling number 200 while Sandy was calling number 2. As soon as we began, people started complaining about being called out of order and they knew for a fact that that person arrived after he or she did! Ahhh....That was the year that I learned to have lots of clip boards and magnifying lenses on hand, pens that actually write, to arrive with a smile and to wear my extra strong armor made from patience and understanding. We got through it but I longed for the days when we just made some signs and took care of the advertising and the nurses did everything else.

That is, the nurses did everything else until H1N1 came along. H1N1 required I learn about the vaccine itself including the fine print, and on a larger scale, organize those clinics because there wasn’t enough to go around at the beginning of the season when it was so badly needed. By the time we were having the first clinic, that influenza was in its second wave and families who had been desperate for the vaccine had to cancel because they were all too sick to attend.

That illness was new to us all and it had to be handled differently because it was not the usual influenza. Usually, very young children, pregnant women and the elderly are considered to be at high risk from serious complications from the flu. It was healthy young people, including adolescents and young adults, who were considered to be at high risk for H1N1. And, because there was not enough to go around at first, we were under orders to follow prioritization guidance.

In time, we saw that young people were, indeed, prone to developing the illness but were not necessarily prone to serious complications. Who succumbed to H1N1 and why is still a mystery to me, for not all had pre-existing conditions. I can only be forever grateful that we had the opportunity to practice having clinics for the whole country without it repeating 1918's pandemic death toll of hundreds of thousands of people.

The arrival of the H1N1 pandemic also reminded us all of the importances of hand-washing and proper cough etiquette (into the elbow, not the hand!). I hope those lessons are never lost, for they are the best way to prevent the spread of so many illnesses.

Last year the vaccine arrived late, many became anxious and, so, they purchased their shot at pharmacy and supermarket clinics or at their doctor's office. Last year was practice for this year but for different reasons. For many years now, we in Massachusetts have had the luxury of receiving free influenza vaccine. Our Department of Public Health purchased the vaccine and distributed it to the local boards of health. Due to budget cuts, that did not happen this year. There is a small amount of vaccine for the **“un-insured and the under-insured”**. Those are the marching orders. How do I know if someone is not insured? I don't know.

If you can afford to get your vaccination at a public clinic offered at your nearby store, go for it! If you can make an appointment with your doctor for your vaccine, go for it!

I am talking with the Director of the Council On Aging, among others, to see who is not capable of those options.

If you are un-insured or underinsured, please contact me at 781 293 6768. It is especially important to get your flu shot if you are pregnant, very young, over 65 years of age or have underlying health conditions such as asthma or diabetes.

This year makes me long for a waiting, complaining crowd, with coffee and cookies in the corner and plenty of vaccine for all.

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