

POSITION STATEMENT

INFLUENZA IMMUNIZATIONS FOR HEALTH CARE WORKERS

May 2013

Statement:

Doctors Nova Scotia recognizes that influenza is a serious illness that affects certain populations disproportionately. Vulnerable groups, such as infants, seniors, pregnant women and those with chronic illnesses, are at higher risk of experiencing complications from influenza. Doctors Nova Scotia encourages all Nova Scotians, including health care workers, to get vaccinated. Doctors Nova Scotia expects that influenza vaccinations should be made available to all Nova Scotians, whether at the doctor's office, in the workplace or any other appropriate setting.

Key considerations¹:

- ✦ Doctors Nova Scotia supports annual influenza immunization as the most effective method of preventing influenza and its complications. Doctors Nova Scotia also supports removing barriers that would make influenza immunization universally accessible.
- ✦ It is Doctors Nova Scotia's position that all physicians and other health care workers should receive the influenza vaccine annually to protect themselves, their families and those in their care, with the exception of physicians and health care workers for whom influenza immunization is contraindicated.
- ✦ Doctors Nova Scotia recommends that annual influenza immunization of physicians and health care workers is part of a comprehensive workplace and patient-safety strategy. Front-line physicians and health care workers must be included in the planning, implementation and evaluation of such programs.
- ✦ Doctors Nova Scotia believes that policies that place immunization as a condition of service should be introduced if health-care worker influenza immunization coverage levels are not protective of patients, and reasonable efforts have been undertaken with education and enhancing accessibility to immunization.
- ✦ Doctors Nova Scotia believes that physicians and health care workers must be well-informed of the risks of the disease to themselves, their families and those they care for, as well as of the benefits and risks of immunization. Leaders of health care institutions and other health care settings are expected to provide physicians and health care workers with information that is thorough, current and accessible.
- ✦ Doctors Nova Scotia urges education programs to discuss the science of vaccines, including safety and efficacy, as well as ethical issues surrounding the immunization of physicians, other health care workers and medical students.

Background:

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, seasonal influenza, or the flu, is a respiratory infection caused by the influenza virus. A variety of strains may circulate every year, infecting 10-20% of all Canadians every year. Some people at higher risk, including those over 65 and adults and children with chronic conditions, such as diabetes and cancer may not easily recover and are at greater risk of more severe complications, such as pneumonia. Between 2 000 and 8 000 Canadians can die of influenza and its complications annually, depending on the severity of the season. The most effective ways to avoid getting the flu are by: washing hands frequently; coughing and sneezing into your arm/sleeve; staying away from people who have the flu or who feel ill; and, by getting an annual flu vaccination. It is particularly important for people considered at higher risk to get vaccinated and this includes health care workers. The flu shot is the best way to protect yourself and others from the virus. It is particularly important for health care workers to be immunized to protect themselves and their patients².

Recently there has been significant media coverage surrounding the issue of mandatory immunizations of health care workers as a condition of employment in some regions. Doctors Nova Scotia fully supports our provincial immunization programs but felt there were sensitivities to the notion of mandatory immunizations for health care workers. Doctors Nova Scotia conducted a review of the issue and discussed options and determined that the position taken by the Canadian Nurses Association was appropriate for this organization as well. The position statement and key considerations were adapted with permission from the CNA's position statement on Influenza Immunization of Registered Nurses¹.

1. Canadian Nurses Association, *Influenza Immunization of Registered Nurses* (position statement, November 2012), http://www2.cna-aiic.ca/cna/documents/pdf/publications/PS_Influenza_Immunization_for_RNs_e.pdf last retrieved May 1, 2013.

2. Public Health Agency of Canada, *Influenza* <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/influenza/index-eng.php> retrieved April 29, 2013.