

A New View on Flu

Saint Francis Relies on Respiratory Therapists to Help Protect Employees, Patients

Annually since 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has estimated seasonal influenza kills between 12,000-56,000 adults in the United States, depending on the year's strain and severity. Despite these numbers, a significant portion of the population remains unconvinced or uninformed ... and therefore unvaccinated.

Prior to a push by the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, hospital employee influenza vaccination rates often mirrored those of the general public, hovering in the low 40s. Since January 2013, however, acute care hospitals have been required to report data on healthcare worker flu vaccination rates to the National Healthcare Safety Network (NHSN) with CDC setting a target goal that 90 percent or more healthcare workers receive the vaccine. As a result, hospitals nationwide began scrambling to implement programs to ensure compliance.

Necessity: The Motherhood of Invention

When the initial directive came down from the CDC, Saint Francis Hospital in Memphis was facing a nursing shortage exacerbated by the increased patient census that frequently occurs during winter months. Although staff flu vaccines often default to nurses, the team at Saint Francis was already stretched thin.

Susan Parsons, MBA, RRT, director for Respiratory Therapy, recalled being in a meeting where the Employee Health Department reached out to nurse leaders to ask for help in getting the entire staff vaccinated. "I was sitting there listening. I know my scope of practice very well, and that reflects respiratory therapists can administer pharmacological agents in the diagnosis, treatment, prevention and rehabilitation of the cardiorespiratory system," said Parsons. "I leaned over to my chief nursing officer and said, 'You know, this is within the scope of respiratory therapists.'"



Susan Parsons

Not only was the novel solution helpful to nurses, Parsons said shifting the responsibility to her team made great sense. "Who better than a respiratory therapist to teach about and encourage taking a flu vaccine?" she asked. "We are the ones who treat patients with flu ... we have seen the progression from flu to pneumonia."

Parsons applauded the CDC's efforts to increase healthcare vaccination rates. "Flu kills," she stated unequivocally. And, she continued, it can be easily spread within a hospital setting. "You can be sick with the flu for 24 hours before you ever know it – that's the scary part," she added of healthcare workers coming into contact with patients who are already ill and often have a weakened immune system. Another danger, she noted, is flu can quickly progress to pneumonia.

Rolling Out a Successful Staff Vaccination Program

Parsons said the first step was for the employee health nurse to review proper dosing and injection technique with the respiratory therapists. While the therapists were confident in their daily work, several were initially a bit nervous about the added vaccination duty. However, they quickly became comfortable in their new role.

Hospital employees were first encouraged to get the flu vaccine during an employee health fair. The respiratory therapy team followed up with those who didn't with a mobile flu cart that made the rounds to all areas across all shifts for

six weeks. Staff members who declined to receive the shot had to either prove a religious or medical reason, such as an allergy to one of the vaccine's components. The other option for those declining the vaccine was to agree to wear a mask in the presence of patients from October through March and thoroughly document compliance with the rule. "Our patients have to be protected," stressed Parsons of the mission behind the message.

While the CDC goal was a 90 percent vaccination rate, under the direction of the respiratory therapy team, Saint Francis has seen rates hover between 96 to 97 percent each year.

Expanded Coverage

By 2015, the CDC called for Prevnar 13, which had previously been available to children, to become part of recommended preventive care in adults over age 65. Once

again, nurses would be asked to add to their long list of duties. They would now need to screen for flu, pneumococcal 23 and Prevnar 13 vaccines, educate patients, administer appropriate vaccines and document all.

Based on the success of the employee initiative, Parsons said the associate chief nursing officer asked if respiratory therapists would take over flu and pneumonia vaccines with patients, as well. "It's not that the nurse couldn't or wouldn't do this, but they have so many other priorities," pointed out Parsons. "The nurse has systems head to toe, but respiratory therapists specialize in cardiopulmonary care."

She added, "For respiratory therapists, we have a much closer relationship with a patient in those conditions – flu and pneumonia – because it's more of a specialty focus for us." Now the therapists would use their expertise to expand their role to all.

While rules are in place for staff vaccinations, patients aren't under the same mandates and can therefore accept or decline. "Every patient that is admitted has to be screened for flu and pneumonia," said Parsons. "If they want (the vaccines), we administer and then document it on the electronic health record." She added EHRs also alert the respiratory therapists to any vaccines given in the community prior to admission.

Since respiratory therapists have taken over the patient program, the gap between admission and inpatient vaccination rates has narrowed. The improved vaccination outcome also had an exciting secondary outcome in that the hospital's COPD readmission rate dropped from over 20 percent in 2013 to 12.65 percent in 2018, putting the hospital well below the national average of 20 percent and at nearly half the Tennessee rate of 23.5 percent for 2018. "The goal of the vaccination program was the quality care of the patient, but this was the golden nugget that came out," said Parsons.

What began as a compliance issue became a successful program utilizing a respiratory therapist's unique skill set. "Can we impact an outcome by thinking outside the box?" questioned Parsons. For Saint Francis, the answer has been a resounding yes.

The Tennessee Center for Patient Safety, a department of the Tennessee Hospital Association, develops and shares hospital and health system success stories and promotes best practices.

