APIC Urges Healthcare Workers to Get Vaccinated Against Influenza

Amid reports that the 2009 H1N1 influenza virus could infect half of the U.S. population and the low rates of flu immunization among healthcare workers, the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC) urges healthcare institutions to require annual flu vaccines for all employees with direct patient contact.

Immunization is a primary way to prevent the flu, yet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that only about 40 percent of healthcare personnel receive yearly flu shots.

"Immunization will be especially critical for healthcare personnel during the 2009-2010 flu season because we will have more than one virus circulating," said APIC 2009 president Christine J. Nutty, RN, MSN, CIC. "All healthcare workers, including those who are pregnant, need to be immunized against seasonal influenza and 2009 H1N1 virus when vaccines become available. This is vitally important to healthcare worker and patient safety."

APIC further recommends that healthcare facilities obtain informed statements acknowledging the risk to patients from employees who decline the vaccine for reasons other than medical.

"Employees who are not vaccinated can transmit both seasonal flu and H1N1 virus to vulnerable patients in healthcare institutions," said Nutty. "Current rates of healthcare worker immunizations are appallingly low and must not be tolerated. It’s time for hospitals to require flu shots – and hold employees accountable for declining the vaccine."

APIC states that healthcare facilities should implement a comprehensive strategy incorporating all of the guidelines for influenza vaccination of healthcare personnel from the CDC’s Healthcare Infection Control Practices Advisory Committee (HICPAC) and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). APIC’s recommendations are published in the APIC position paper, "Influenza Immunization of Healthcare Personnel."

"The rapid spread of H1N1 reminds us of what happens when a population has no immunity and underscores the importance of immunization to prevent influenza," said Linda R. Greene, RN, MPS, CIC, lead author of APIC’s position paper and director of infection prevention and control at Rochester General Health System. "We want to be certain that healthcare personnel are protected against both seasonal flu and the 2009 H1N1 virus. Otherwise, facilities could face a double problem of increased illness and absenteeism among staff coupled with overcrowded emergency departments."

Influenza is a highly contagious disease that can spread before symptoms appear. If a healthcare worker contracts the flu, they may spread influenza infection to patients and other workers before realizing they are sick. The CDC estimates that seasonal influenza results in 226,000 hospitalizations and 36,000 deaths annually in the U.S.

APIC recommendations for influenza immunization apply to healthcare personnel in acute care hospitals, nursing homes, skilled nursing facilities, physician’s offices, urgent care centers, outpatient settings and home health settings. All employees with direct patient contact should be immunized annually including physicians, nurses, therapists, dieticians, religious workers, environmental services and kitchen staff.