Overwhelming compliance to protect patients

Flu Season Arrives, a Few Employees Terminated for Vaccination Noncompliance

By Tyler Smith

With flu season gathering force, University of Colorado Health released data on staff compliance with its mandatory vaccination policy.

All but about 230 of UCH’s nearly 15,000 employees received a flu shot, according to data supplied by the system’s Human Resources departments. At Central (University of Colorado Hospital), three staffers were terminated for refusing to get vaccinated.

Human Resources business partners at Central said two of the three terminated employees worked in non clinical areas, while a third worked on an inpatient unit. There were no terminations of employees in Ambulatory Services.

At UCH South (Memorial Hospital), three employees were terminated and one resigned rather than get the shot.

At UCH North (Poudre Valley Hospital and Medical Center of the Rockies) one employee was terminated for noncompliance and another resigned after deciding against getting the shot.

A total of 224 UCH employees were granted flu shot exemptions on either medical or religious grounds (see box). About 70 percent (158) of the exemptions were for medical reasons. Of the 66 granted for religious reasons, the majority (41) were at North, which also had the greatest total number of exemptions (91).

Employees who received exemptions are required to wear protective masks when they have direct contact with patients or are in areas where patients and visitors congregate, such as waiting rooms, lobbies or cafeterias.

The system’s vaccination policy follows a 2012 state mandate requiring that all health care workers receive influenza vaccinations, regardless of whether or not they have direct patient contact.

UCH Director of Employee Health and Well Being Deborah Jones said the tiny number of employee terminations for

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noncompliance was necessary to protect patients, families and other employees from a disease that can be life-threatening.

Gathering storm. Inoculating more than 99 percent of employees against influenza could be a crucial safety factor in what looks like a difficult flu season. At Central, 101 patients were hospitalized with confirmed cases of influenza A (all of them H1N1) between Nov. 1, 2013 and Jan. 8, 2014, said Infectious Disease Medical Director Michelle Barron, MD. That's nearly three times the number reported between November 2012 and January 2013.

Two deaths thus far at Central have been attributed to the flu, Barron said.

The number of hospitalized patients rose steadily throughout December 2013, peaking at 22 the final week of the month. As of Jan. 8, 17 patients at Central were hospitalized with influenza, Barron said, already close to the two dozen or so admitted for the entire month of January last year.

Barron also noted that the flu thus far is striking more than those at highest risk, such as patients in intensive care units, the immuno-compromised, and the elderly. The average patient age is just 52, she said.

Nationally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported increased influenza activity through the last week of 2013. More than 80 percent of regional jurisdictions reported “regional or widespread activity.” In Region 8, which includes Colorado, each of the six jurisdictions reported increased influenza activity.

In Colorado, influenza outbreaks are “widespread,” according to the CDC. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) said 748 influenza hospitalizations from 45 counties had been reported through Jan. 4. Nearly all were infected with H1N1, the report said, and some 56 percent of the patients were under the age of 65.

At Central, meanwhile, there are as yet no formal restrictions for visitors to any hospital areas, although the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and the Blood and Marrow Transplant Unit independently require visitors to don protective masks.

In addition, a large multidisciplinary group with representatives from throughout the hospital has begun meeting to prepare for a worsening flu season and possible patient surge. In response to the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, the hospital imposed visitor restrictions, made protective gear and sanitizing solution widely available, posted regular updates on the intranet Hub and public website and formed a task force that met regularly to address issues as the season progressed.