

Changes to Provincial Influenza Prevention Policy

Health employers and the Provincial Health Officer are suspending some mandatory aspects of the Provincial Influenza Prevention Policy that requires healthcare employees, contractors and medical staff to get immunized or wear a mask when in patient care areas during the flu season. Reporting of vaccination status remains mandatory. Getting the annual vaccine remains an effective way to prevent the spread of influenza among staff and patients/clients/residents. Appropriate use of masking by unvaccinated healthcare workers can also protect employees and their patients from influenza.

Q&As

Q. Why is the mandatory immunization or mask aspect of the policy being suspended?

A. The mandatory aspect of the policy, requiring employees to either be vaccinated against influenza or wear a mask in patient care areas, is being suspended in favour of a more collaborative approach. The purpose of the Influenza Prevention Policy remains the same: to reduce death and illness from influenza by preventing the spread of influenza through immunization and appropriate use of masks by healthcare workers, patients and visitors in all healthcare settings. This collaborative approach aims to achieve this important goal while also recognizing the professionalism of healthcare employees and physicians.

Q. Has the policy been effective? Have vaccination rates increased following the implementation of the policy in 2012?

A. Prior to 2012, health care worker influenza vaccination coverage was 35-46 per cent in acute care facilities and 49-64 per cent in residential care facilities. Following implementation of the policy in 2012, rates increased to 74-76 per cent in acute care and 74-79 per cent in residential care.

Q. Is reporting of vaccination status still mandatory?

A. Yes. This part of the Influenza Prevention Policy remains unchanged.

Q. Can employees and physicians be disciplined for failing to report their vaccination status?

A. While unvaccinated health care workers will no longer face disciplinary penalties should they fail to wear masks in patient care areas during flu season, all health care workers must still report their immunization status. Failure to do so may still result in disciplinary measures.

Q. Has the policy been amended because arbitrators in Ontario found that a similar policy was unreasonable?

A. No. There are significant differences between the Ontario and British Columbia circumstances, including the history of the policies, the different collective agreements, and the terms of the policies. The BC policy is a provincial policy that was introduced in 2012 following consultation with employers and health care unions. The policy was grieved by several unions and heard at arbitration in 2013, where the arbitrator upheld the policy, determining that it was reasonable.

Q. If a collaborative approach is preferred, why was a mandatory policy introduced in the first place?

A. Historically, healthcare workers have had relatively low flu vaccination rates (less than 50 per cent) despite extensive efforts by health employers to promote vaccination. A mandatory policy was introduced to ensure patients were protected by increasing vaccination rates, or requiring masks to be used to prevent the spread of influenza and the negative health outcomes associated with it.

Q. Some people argue that the medical evidence to support the “vaccinate or mask” policy is insufficient. Is this true?

A. No. Health care workers are one of the most common sources of flu transmission to patients in health care settings, and their patients are often the most vulnerable to serious consequences as a result of infection. Evidence shows that immunizing health care workers against the flu can reduce transmission to patients and resulting negative health outcomes. Influenza has by far the highest rates of mortality among vaccine-preventable diseases, and hospitalized patients are more vulnerable to influenza than members of the general population.

Q. What happens if vaccination rates among healthcare workers decrease?

A. If vaccination rates of healthcare workers decrease, the mandatory aspect of the policy may be reintroduced in future years.

Q. Under the revised policy, healthcare workers are “expected” to get the annual flu vaccine or wear a mask while in patient care areas during the flu season. How is this different than being mandatory?

A. Employees are expected to get vaccinated or mask because it is the best practice for preventing the spread of influenza; however, employees or physicians who do not comply with this aspect of the policy will no longer face disciplinary measures. Rather, an educational approach will be taken with these individuals. The reporting of immunization status remains mandatory.

Q. Does this policy change relate to an active BCNU grievance against the policy?

A. In 2015, BCNU filed an Industry Wide Application Dispute (IWAD) concerning the policy. This grievance was expected to be heard in arbitration starting in 2020. It is important to note that all unions and employers support vaccination as a practice to protect patients from exposure to the flu virus and to protect healthcare workers and their families; however, some unions have objected to the enforcement aspect of the policy maintaining that it is an individual’s right to choose whether or not to be vaccinated.

Instead of continuing to litigate the issue, the Provincial Health Officer, with the support of the Ministry of Health and HEABC, saw an opportunity to adopt a more collaborative approach with partner stakeholders. It is hoped that this approach, focused more on education and cooperation, will better meet the goal of reducing death and illness from influenza by preventing the spread of influenza through having health care workers vaccinated or use masks appropriately.

Q. What if an influenza outbreak occurs?

A. If an outbreak is declared, the respective health employer’s influenza outbreak policy will apply. The outbreak policy is not affected by changes to the Influenza Prevention Policy.

Q&A

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Q. What if an employee refuses to be vaccinated or mask?

A. Getting the annual vaccine remains the most effective way to prevent the spread of influenza, and appropriate use of masking also supports employee wellness and patient safety. We rely on the professionalism of healthcare workers to use masks appropriately to protect patients and themselves.

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