



THE CITY OF NEW YORK

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE

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Testimony

of

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before the

New York City Council Health Committee

regarding

New York City's Efforts to Combat the Flu

October 23, 2007

250 Broadway, 16th Floor
New York City

Good afternoon Chairman Rivera and members of the Health Committee. I am Dr. Jane Zucker, Assistant Commissioner for the Bureau of Immunization at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). On behalf of Commissioner Frieden, thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the Department's efforts to combat seasonal flu.

Each year nearly 3,000 New Yorkers die from flu and pneumonia, and thousands more are hospitalized as a result of these preventable conditions. Anyone can get the flu, however those most vulnerable to its complications are adults age 65 and older and children younger than two years old.

In 2005-06, an estimated 59% of adults 65 years of age and older in NYC reported receiving a flu vaccine. This represents an 8% increase in the coverage rate from that of 2004-05, the season in which nearly half the adult flu vaccine supply was pulled from the market as a result of a manufacturing failure. In previous seasons, flu vaccination coverage was between 63% and 64% for persons 65 and older. There are racial and ethnic disparities in coverage: 64% coverage was reached among Caucasians, but there was only 47% coverage among African Americans. Coverage rates among Latinos was 59% and Asians was 63%. Data on neighborhood coverage levels for the 2005-06 season indicate that neighborhoods with the lowest coverage remain Central Brooklyn and Harlem.

New Yorkers can call 311 or visit the DOHMH website to find out where to get a flu shot. The Department's flu shot locator provides referrals based on age and zip code, and in addition to DOHMH clinics, senior centers, and Health and Hospitals Corporation sites, we have expanded the listings to include private sites and links to other websites, such as the American Lung Association. This year our locator provides referrals to more than 730 sites throughout the five boroughs.

In order to increase immunization coverage and reduce vaccine-preventable hospitalizations and deaths, the Department made immunizing New Yorkers a part of the DOHMH Take Care New York (TCNY) health policy agenda. In recognition of the importance of preventing flu, the Department has a comprehensive strategic plan that focuses on six main areas: provider education, clinic services, media and advertising, community outreach, vaccine distribution, and legislative change.

The Department encourages all New Yorkers to have a medical home, and accordingly the Immunization Program encourages patients to seek flu shots at their regular doctor's office. To ensure that providers are well informed, the Department publishes an annual City Health Information newsletter regarding flu, sponsors grand rounds and lectures, and distributes Influenza Action Kits along with a more detailed Influenza Resource Guide. The Department promotes best practices for improving vaccination coverage— from practical recommendations that can be used in small private offices such as chart stickers, to tools for promoting vaccination in hospital and large clinic settings. DOHMH places particular emphasis on the importance of flu shots for health care workers in medical settings and staff in long term care facilities.

The Department also provides direct clinical services through walk-in Immunization Clinics in each of the five boroughs to ensure that all New Yorkers have access to free flu shots during flu season. We began providing flu vaccine as soon as we received our supply in mid-September and as of October 12th we have already vaccinated over 2200 people in our clinics.

The federal Vaccines for Children (VFC) program covers children up to age 19 and includes those covered by Medicaid, as well those who are uninsured or underinsured and seen in Federally Qualified Health Centers. Approximately 80% of infants and two-thirds of children younger than 19 in New York City are eligible to receive flu vaccine through the VFC program. In the 2006-07 flu season, approximately 75,000 children 6 through 23 months of age received a flu shot, and we are optimistic about our ability to increase pediatric vaccination rates this year through the distribution of VFC vaccine.

DOHMH also partners with the Department for the Aging (DFTA), the Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNS), the New York City Housing Authority and community organizations to facilitate flu shot events. Each year, letters are sent to all DFTA senior centers inviting them to hold flu clinics, and this year approximately 400 clinics have already been scheduled. DOHMH provides vaccine to VNS for additional community based outreach activities and to the Department of Homeless Services to reach the homeless population. Finally, the Department leads the New York City Adult Immunization Coalition, which meets quarterly, and is comprised of medical and professional partners dedicated to promoting flu vaccination.

To increase community awareness of the importance of flu vaccination and to promote community demand for flu vaccine, DOHMH sends educators to health fairs, Community Board meetings, and senior centers. We place promotional advertisements in supermarket circulars and in community newspapers. To reduce racial and ethnic disparities in immunization rates, the Department also engages in specific outreach to populations in neighborhoods with low coverage rates. For example, in Central Brooklyn we worked closely with the Brooklyn Flu Steering Committee to develop educational materials. We targeted intervention strategies to both community residents and medical professionals, including coordinating with the Provident Clinical Society to educate its physician members. In addition to many of the past year's initiatives, DOHMH is planning new community outreach activities, including collaboration with groups such as the New York Academy of Medicine's Harlem Community and Academic Partnership.

Radio public service announcements have begun and we will soon release a new campaign that includes subway advertisements and billboards. We are enhancing our flu season media and advertising with the addition of new posters and health bulletins targeting Spanish-speaking and African American New Yorkers.

Despite these efforts, flu vaccine coverage in New York City has not increased from the 2001 level of 63% for three of the last four years (not including the 2004-05 shortage season). This rate falls far short of the National Healthy People 2010 goal of

90% for persons 65 and older. Barriers to expanded immunization coverage include supply issues, exemplified by the flu vaccine shortage in 2004-05, and misperceptions about the safety of vaccine.

Vaccine supply problems have significantly complicated the delivery of vaccine and limited the number of available doses, every year since 2000 (with one exception in 2003). These issues are largely related to national and international problems of vaccine production and are outside of the Department's control. For those years, instead of promoting vaccination, DOHMH was forced to spend valuable time and resources redistributing vaccine to facilities serving the most vulnerable populations and by running large flu clinics for those who could not otherwise obtain vaccinations from their regular doctor. I'm happy to report that for the 2007-08 flu season the Department received enough vaccine in time to fully implement our agenda. Nationwide, approximately 132 million doses of vaccine are expected to be available for distribution.

Despite our efforts to increase immunization rates and prevent the spread of flu, flu remains a serious public health issue in New York City. DOHMH conducts year-round flu surveillance and responds to outbreaks of flu in the City, including those occurring in populations that are at high risk for complications secondary to flu infection (e.g., in long-term care facilities). These outbreaks occur every season, and the Department actively provides guidance to facilities on curtailing outbreaks, makes site visits to assess infection control practices, and collects data to help prevent outbreaks in the future.

The Department participates in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Influenza Sentinel Provider Network program, in which designated providers report on the number of flu cases they see in their respective practices. This system was initiated in NYC during the 2001-02 flu season with the recruitment of twenty medical practices and has since expanded to include 70 additional practices, exceeding the CDC goal of one sentinel per 250,000 residents.

DOHMH engages in laboratory surveillance, communicating weekly with the approximately 40 New York City laboratories performing testing for flu. The Department also tracks flu-associated deaths. This information is used to prepare the weekly flu activity report posted on the DOHMH website and is sent to all participating New York City sentinel providers, the New York State Department of Health, and the CDC.

Looking ahead, a tremendous opportunity exists to more fully develop our immunization infrastructure. New York State law does not currently allow pharmacists to administer flu and pneumonia immunizations. Allowing pharmacists to provide immunizations has become the standard of care, and is permitted in 46 states. Pharmacies offer a natural entry point for targeting those who are at high-risk for flu and its complications. People at elevated risk – for example, those with chronic conditions such as diabetes – regularly see their pharmacist to refill their prescriptions, providing an opportunity for flu vaccination, and pharmacists are licensed health care professionals whose training curriculum includes all the critical skills that, with appropriate

certification, makes them well-qualified professionals for provision of immunizations to adults. The City strongly supports legislation (A2140/S1312) to enable licensed pharmacists to administer immunizations to adults.

Now is the time for people to get vaccinated, and the Department welcomes the opportunity to partner with the Council in an effort to increase vaccination rates. We encourage you to get a flu shot at a senior center in your district, and to send out a list of clinics or senior center flu shot sites to your constituents. We have promotional brochures and posters for you to take back to your district office, and are happy to help you order additional materials.

Thank you again for your interest in this issue. I am pleased to answer any questions you may have at this time.

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