

- Vaccination

Get flu vaccine to free hospitals for Covid-19 response—expert

BusinessMirror · 29 Jul 2021 · B7 · By Rory Visco Contributor

There are a lot of respiratory illnesses out there but one noticeable kind—and has been with mankind for several decades already—is the influenza virus which causes the flu. This contagious respiratory illness infects the nose, throat and sometimes even the lungs, and can be mild or even severe or worse, can cause death.

The virus enters the body through the respiratory tract via droplets from an infected person, either through coughing, talking or sneezing (sounds familiar?), or contact with surfaces contaminated with discharges from an infected person. The influenza incubation period is from one to three days, with common symptoms like fever of at least 38°C, headache, runny nose, sore throat, cough or other respiratory manifestations, or even muscle and joint pains.

According to the Department of Health's (DOH) Influenza Monthly Surveillance Report from January 1 to June 29, 2019, it reported 68,091 influenza-like illness cases that afflicted 50 percent of males and 50 percent of females, with most of those affected in the one to four years of age range, or about 29 percent.

According to Dr. Donald Ray Josue, Vaccines Medical Director of GSK Philippines, it is already influenza season in the country. Though it circulates all-year round, the highest number of cases occur from June to November, peaking in August or the so-called “flu season.”

Since vaccination is still the best way to prevent flu, Dr. Josue said it should be given from February to June, but since the Philippines is in the middle of the flu season, everyone should be vaccinated as soon as possible.

Education is essential

HOWEVER, it seems many people are not aware about the importance of flu vaccination because they look at it as a simple fever or in Tagalog, *trangkaso*, Dr. Josue said. Since everyone experiences it, it is often not a priority. “what they need to realize is that *trangkaso* can result in serious complications. Sadly sometimes we cannot predict who among even normal healthy individuals can have the complications; you may liken influenza to colds plus fever equals *trangkaso*.”

He explained that influenza is compared to the common cold since they share some symptoms, but influenza often has more severe ones that can lead to complications such as hospitalization and death. “These complications are more common in children below five years of age, pregnant women, patients with chronic illnesses, and the elderly.

Local medical societies conduct disease awareness initiatives and have published guidelines on influenza prevention, including annual influenza vaccination. These guidelines are consistent with the world Health Organization (WHO) and other public health authorities' recommendations like the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and Public Health England.

“we need to note that now the guidelines are not just for health-care professionals and high-risk individuals unlike before. Influenza vaccination is recommended for children six months and over and is part of the routine childhood as well as adult immunization schedule.

To create awareness on the dangers of influenza, healthcare professionals should highlight in disease education that flu may have severe consequences, while vaccination has a full range of benefits, both in disease prevention and halting the spread of the disease. “It must also be emphasized that WHO indicates that flu vaccination can generate savings for individuals, and families.”

Also, as a company, GSK Philippines, says Dr. Josue, is open to collaborate with non-government organizations and other institutions regarding its disease awareness programs on flu.

Dr. Josue further emphasized that given the changes the pandemic has brought to health care, different platforms such as telemedicine and social media should be utilized in delivering these messages. Relatedly, there are available—and reliable—sites in the internet where information is available.

Priority to the pandemic

UNDERSTANDABLY, according to Dr. Josue, the health-care system has to prioritize its Covid-19 response to contain the pandemic. Furthermore, because of the restrictions in mobility, patients have experienced challenges in access to healthcare at this time.

There are diseases that continue to pose a threat to the population and must also be given medical attention. However, influenza is a vaccine-preventable disease, unlike other ailments like diabetes or hypertension. This means that an effective vaccine can protect people from influenza and also prevent the complications.

“Hence, educating people about the disease and the available vaccines is important because they’ll have greater knowledge on how they can protect themselves from getting sick. Additionally, getting flu vaccinations can also help in preventing an influenza outbreak from happening on top of the Covid-19 pandemic. Preventing a flu outbreak can, in turn, help our health-care system conserve the resources needed during this time.”

To gain access to health-care services for their ailments, Dr. Josue advised that telemedicine is a useful platform in practice and is accepted by patients for practical reasons of safety and convenience, particularly in this time of pandemic. essentially, he said patients are advised that hospitals and other health-care facilities are following protocols to reduce their risk of exposure to Covid-19.

Flu vaccine

WITH regards to vaccination for influenza, Dr. Josue said that even if the public is aware of flu and its prevention through healthy lifestyle and vaccination, many remain unvaccinated due to barriers like their busy schedules from balancing their responsibilities at home and work, complacency, thinking that their risk of contracting influenza is low, and the lack of awareness on its severity.

“what many may not be aware of is that globally, there are advancements in vaccine development in terms of delivery and production platform. All of the existing licensed vaccines are effective in preventing influenza,” Dr. Josue remarked.

In terms of vaccination hesitancy, which many think of today in light of Covid-19, it has been a challenge for the past few years in the country. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented an opportunity to educate the public on the importance of vaccines. “WHO promotes widespread immunization as it is cost-effective and one of the most successful interventions we have,” Dr. Josue averred.

On top of the pandemic, Dr. Josue pointed out that people should also protect themselves from other, equally dangerous ailments, such as flu. everyone should practice healthy habits such as good hygiene, healthy diet, enough sleep, and physical activity. In addition, the WHO says the most effective way to prevent influenza is through vaccination. More importantly, Dr. Josue said patients should also have regular wellness checks with their doctors to know more about influenza and the value of immunization.