



# Public Health Mōno-Gram

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**Public Health**  
Prevent. Promote. Protect

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## Essential Truths About Influenza Vaccine for Health Care Workers

It's that time of year again – flu vaccine is being offered to all health care workers (HCW). The most efficient method of preventing cases of influenza in the community, with the resulting morbidity and mortality, is by the use of pre-exposure influenza immunization.

Truth #1: Influenza infection is a serious illness causing significant morbidity and mortality adversely affecting the public's health on an annual basis. Up to 36,000 Americans die annually – the equivalent of the 9/11 attacks every month for 12 months – with an annual health care related cost of 3-5 billion dollars.

Truth #2: Influenza-infected HCWs can transmit this deadly virus to their vulnerable patients. Complications of nosocomial influenza are particularly burdensome on the elderly, the immunocompromised, critically ill patients, and young children – the very populations that congregate in hospitals and clinics. The virus can be transmitted to patients by both symptomatic and asymptomatic HCW. Therefore, simply staying home from work when sick is an insufficient strategy to utilize. Besides, HCWs are like anyone else – they go to work when they are sick. In addition, evidence shows that for at least 24 hours prior to the development of symptoms, spread of the virus via fomites is significant.

Truth #3: Influenza vaccine of HCWs saves money for employees and employers, and creates a safer work environment. Add up the cost of doctor's visits, missed days from work, medications, hospitalizations, and additional staffing costs, and you come up with no small sum. In addition, decreased reimbursement from CMS will begin on January 1, 2014, for those facilities not in compliance with a 90% vaccination rate.

Truth #4: Influenza vaccination of HCWs is already recommended by the CDC and has been the standard of care since 1981. However, this passive, voluntary system has achieved dismal results, reaching an average of only 40-70% of HCWs nationally. Therefore, a requirement for health care facilities to offer immunization has been in place since 2007, achieving modest results. After decades of voluntary trial and error programs, the time has come to take the next step in addressing the public health challenge by requiring influenza vaccination of all HCWs.

Truth #5: Influenza vaccine is safe. Decades of data show the vaccine to be safe, effective, and cost saving.

Truth #6: HCWs and health care systems have an ethical, moral, and professional duty to protect vulnerable patients from transmissible disease. The freedom to decline is a good thing, as long as no one gets hurt. The freedom to put others at risk and potentially kill someone is not such a good thing. There is a duty to protect the weakest, the most vulnerable of our citizens – babies, people with immune problems, and the frail elderly. They are the ones who will suffer if too many people say no. It's time for us to step in and say, "Enough".

Truth #7: The health care system will either lead or be told. We have not led, and we are being told. Although it was decades ago that George Orwell called hospitals "the antechamber to the tomb", check out the recent book, "Unaccountable", to get an idea of the public perception of us. The legal screws are tightening.

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*Mono County - Healthy People, Healthy Communities*

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