

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Flu Vaccine 2014: How Good Is It ?”

Every year we are faced with the same dilemma regarding the flu vaccine. Previously, I have cautioned folks about being misled to believe that the vaccine will give them 100% protection. I pointed out the conclusion of the respected Cochrane Collaboration group, who came to the alarming findings on the ineffectiveness of flu vaccines and stated that it was "basically worthless." Even when studies "matched" vaccines to the viral strain (which is uncommon) 97% of those injected received no benefit. Additionally, vaccinations had "no effect on hospital admissions or complication rates." Now, in the 2014 flu season, the CDC advised doctors that this year's flu vaccine is not as effective because the current strain of the virus has mutated. Dr. Tom Frieden said, "We could have a season that is more severe than most with hospitalizations and more deaths." Experts found that 52% of the 85 influenza virus samples collected and analyzed were different than the virus strains included in this year's vaccine, indicating a mutation or drift of the strain. Influenza A (H3N2) is the most common strain of the virus this season and this strain has been linked to higher rates of hospitalization and death, especially for those at high risk for complications, which is usually the very young, the elderly and those with chronic health conditions such as asthma or heart problems. Health officials said it is too late to create another version of the flu vaccine this year, because it takes four months to produce the vaccine. Still, Dr. Frieden said that although it is not as protective against a mutated strain, it can still decrease the severity of illness caused by the virus and the CDC still recommends getting the vaccine. The CDC is also pushing the use of antiviral medications, such as Tamiflu and Relenza, once symptoms have started. They said only 1 in 6 people who are severely ill with flu take them. During the 2012-2013 flu season 12,337 people were hospitalized and 249 children died. According to the CDC, ninety percent of those children were not vaccinated. Even though Louisiana ranks high in this season's flu cases, flu activity across the country is currently low. Officials report that 150 million does of flu vaccine will be available this season. Vaccines should be given before Thanksgiving because it takes two weeks to build up immunity against the flu.

In the America that I love, the CDC acknowledges that common side effects include soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site, low-grade fever and aches. Serious effects can include difficulty breathing, swelling around the lips or eyes, hives, a racing heart, dizziness and high fever. Please consult your doctor with your concerns and questions.

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