

## Health-care community prepares

### Providers stress importance of flu shots for employees

BY ANGELA GONZALES | agonzales@bizjournals.com

As the H1N1 virus continues to make its way all over the news, hospitals are restricting visitation and preparing for a deluge of patients and worker absenteeism.

Typically, Arizona's flu season hits later in the year, which is when hospitals normally begin restricting patient visits. But the novel H1N1 influenza (so called because it is being seen in humans for the first time) that hit in April never really went away during the summer, said Dr. Bob England, director of the Maricopa County Department of Public Health.

Because this virus is new to humans, most will not be immune to it, he said.

"On top of that, we'll still have the regular flu season making its appearance later this fall," he said. "We're predicting as many as one in every three of us may get the flu this year."

On Oct. 2, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Arizona was one of 27 states with widespread activity of the H1N1 virus.

As employers gear up for a less productive work force, hospitals won't be immune to the impending threat.

Health care workers aren't clamoring for influenza shots, said Dr. Andrea Houfek, medical director for pediatrics and urgent care at Cigna Medical Group.

"You would be surprised how health care workers nationwide are not good about their own care," she said. "It's considered good if more than half of a health care facility takes the seasonal flu vaccine."

She would not disclose what percentage of Cigna Medical Group's employees get vaccinated. She said it's better than the national average, though not 100 percent. Health care providers are encouraging their staffs to get both the seasonal and H1N1 vaccines this year, and Houfek hopes to see Cigna's numbers increase.

"We've also made sure our employees understand they are seeing sick and vulnerable patients every minute of every day, and protecting themselves isn't just protecting themselves, it's protecting those patients," she said.

It's not like employees fall through the cracks, she said. All Cigna Medical Group employees who choose not to receive the vaccine are required to sign a form that says they are refusing it.

Debbie Johnston, director of regulatory affairs and policy for the Arizona Hospital and Healthcare Association, said New York is the only state in the country mandating that health care workers receive the seasonal flu shot.

Hospitals are looking at changing their policies regarding sick workers. The CDC recommends that employers allow people to stay home while they are contagious during this flu season, and not require a doctor's note to prove they were sick.

"Hospitals are dusting off those policies, looking at



Houfek

them again in relation to H1N1," Johnston said.

Hospital officials also are looking at how they will fill shifts when their nurses are home sick, such as reassigning administrative nurses to the bedside and tapping into temporary staffing agencies.



Johnston

Dr. Robert Fromm, chief medical officer of Maricopa Integrated Health System, said MIHS has been planning how hospital and health clinic employees will respond to the community, and how administrators will deal with a sick work force.

"We have a number of individuals we have used on a contract basis in the past," he said. "We're creating a list of those who continue to have an interest to be used to supplement our own active work force to help manage those patients should a disaster ensue."

Nancy Hicks-Arsenault, systems director of emergency services at Scottsdale Healthcare, said the health system is in the midst of similar discussions.

One way to have more nurses available at the bedside is to use more nurses aides and technicians, she said. Rather than having a registered nurse help a patient bathe, for example, that job can be given to an aide or tech, she said.

Drs. Goodman Partridge OB/GYN PLLC is hiring 20 medical assistants to keep up with the demand among pregnant women to get the H1N1 vaccine, said Dr. Clifford Goodman Jr., founding physician and president of the Chandler medical practice.

A pregnant woman who gets any type of flu is at risk for serious complications and hospitalization, he said. That's why the CDC is recommending that pregnant women,

### HOSPITAL RESTRICTIONS

An uptick in flu cases is prompting hospitals to restrict patient visits:

- Children younger than 12 are not permitted to visit.
- Anyone who has a fever, sore throat or cough, or is pregnant, may not visit.
- Essential visitors only, and no more than two adult visitors per patient at a time.

stretched thin in their staffing, and a surge in patients will exacerbate the problem.

children, those with chronic health conditions and health care workers be first in line for the H1N1 vaccine.

"As a woman advances in her pregnancy, her immune system becomes more compromised and susceptible to infections, putting her life at risk, along with the fetus," Goodman said. "Those who will have close contact with a new born also should be vaccinated."

Dr. James Johnson, medical director of Clinical Resources Group in Scottsdale and an expert in medical preparedness planning, said hospitals and medical practices already are