



Dear Colleagues,

As you know, the 2019/2020 flu season is about to begin. Influenza remains a serious concern in British Columbia, causing significant morbidity and mortality. In fact, each year across Canada there are approximately 3,500 deaths from the flu and its complications. Hospitalized patients and seniors in residential care are more vulnerable than healthy adults to severe illness or complications from influenza.

In order to better protect healthcare workers and the patients and residents we care for, each health authority and Providence Health Care enacted the Influenza Control Program Policy, starting in 2012, which required health care workers, physicians and visitors to choose either the flu vaccine or to wear a mask in patient care areas during flu season. It also required staff and physicians to report their immunization status. The program has been very effective in raising awareness of the measures we must all take to prevent influenza and most importantly leading to a significant rise in vaccination rates across the province.

However, some aspects of the Influenza Control Program Policy have also been met with opposition, particularly by some of our union partners. They have taken issue in particular with the mandatory aspect of either immunizing or wearing a mask in patient care areas throughout flu season, and the prospect of discipline of unvaccinated employees who do not wear masks appropriately during flu season.

This year I am recommending we modify our approach, based on collaboration with our union partners, and the professional judgment of our health care staff and physicians. As such, I recommend the Influenza Control Program Policy be replaced by an amended policy, wherein health care staff and physicians will still be expected to either be immunized against influenza or wear a mask as appropriate in patient care areas. However, no longer will unvaccinated employees or physicians face discipline for failing to wear masks at all times in patient care areas. Reporting of immunization status remains mandatory.

Influenza immunization remains the most important and effective measure to prevent influenza and to protect healthcare workers, their families and the patients and residents we care for. For those who choose not to be immunized or who cannot receive the influenza vaccine, appropriate use of masks can also provide protection for healthcare workers and patients from influenza and remains an important part of the amended policy. In the past six years of the Influenza Control Program Policy, vaccine uptake rates have risen and remained at high levels and this year we need to ensure that trend will continue. I believe this collaborative approach and amended policy will support all healthcare workers and physicians to do their best to protect themselves and the vulnerable people we care for from influenza.

...|2

This year influenza season for the purposes of the amended policy will start on December 4, 2019.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to providing safe care to our patients, residents and clients.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bonnie Henry". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Bonnie" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Henry".

Bonnie Henry
MD, MPH, FRCPC
Provincial Health Officer