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Region looks at new flu fighting measures

Long-term care patients rely on their health care workers to keep them well. But during flu season, some staffers may unwittingly be making their patients sick.

And the consequences can be deadly, heard Halton's health and social services committee recently.

According to the Halton Regional Health Department (HRHD), more than 6,500 Canadians are killed by the flu every year. Another 75,000 become ill enough to require hospitalization.

In Halton last year, there were seven flu outbreaks involving 95 long-term care patients.

That can prove fatal for some, said Dr. Bob Nosal, the region's medical officer of health.

"If there are patient deaths, the

question is, 'is it related?'" he said. "The feeling is that for many of them, influenza would have been a primary contributor."

To tackle the problem, long-term care facilities have been diligent in giving their patients flu shots.

But the battered immune systems of the very elderly can give that approach less than a fighting chance.

Outbreaks can spread even among immunized residents because only a third of those aged 80 and older develop enough antibodies to effectively fend off the virus.

For that reason, the HRHD has targeted staff in long-term care settings for their 1999-2000 influenza immunization campaign.

"Although immunizing the residents is important, more important is immunizing the staff," said Dr. Nosal. Last year, staff were immunized at a rate of only 56 per cent.

While that is up from 42 per cent the previous year, it falls far short of a provincial standard of 70 per cent.

"There will be a real push to get staff immunized," said Adelina

Urbanski, Halton Region's health and social services director.

The problem is exacerbated because health care workers are prone to staying on the job despite feeling ill.

"Everyone is swamped and working very hard as it is," said Dr. Nosal. "You are driven to want to be there."

Receiving a flu shot should be considered a job expectation for long-term care workers, he said.

"It is simple, it is effective and it stops people from getting sick and dying."

And the health department is making it mandatory for workers who show signs of the flu to stay home until they have a clean bill of health. Facilities may even choose to send workers home without pay if they fall ill after refusing a flu shot without a valid medical reason for doing so, said Dr. Nosal.

For others at risk from complications of the flu, HRHD will also be setting up nine community flu clinics throughout Halton, up from six last year.


—By Irene Gentle, special

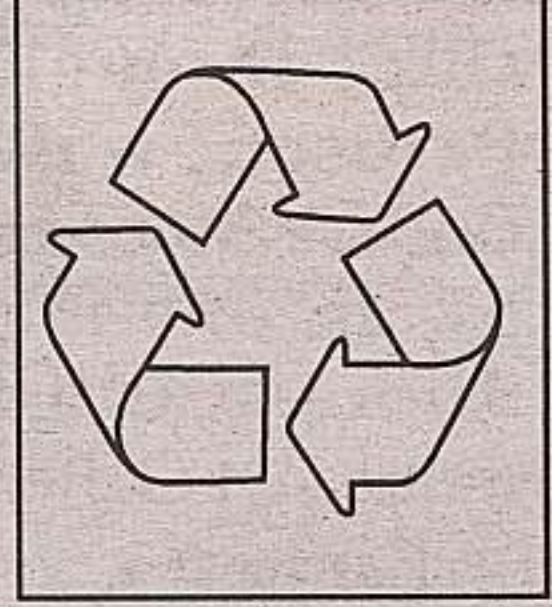
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