For 25 years, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) and the Healthcare Infection Control Practices Advisory Committee have recommended that all U.S. healthcare workers get an annual flu shot. The American Hospital Association, the Infectious Disease Society of America, the Society for Health Epidemiology of America and the Association of Professionals in Infection Control also support influenza vaccination for all healthcare personnel.

Historically, the National Health Interview Surveys done by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have shown that flu vaccination coverage among healthcare workers tends to be low—rarely exceeding 50 percent. However, there are encouraging signs that more healthcare workers are heeding the call to prevent potential harm to their patients by getting a flu shot. According to CDC surveys taken during the 2009–2010 influenza season, vaccination coverage among healthcare workers nationally reached nearly 62 percent for the seasonal influenza vaccine and more than 64 percent for either the seasonal or 2009 H1N1 vaccine. Comparable coverage was seen during the 2010–2011 season, with nearly 64 percent of healthcare workers getting vaccinated. I know that many hospitals and other healthcare facilities are employing multi-pronged strategies—like setting up rolling vaccination stations to make getting a vaccination as easy as possible—to improve vaccination rates among their healthcare workers, and I want to acknowledge those great efforts.

According to the CDC surveys taken during the 2010-2011 season, national vaccination coverage among physicians and dentists (84.2 percent) was similar to coverage among nurse practitioners and physician assistants (82.6 percent) and was significantly higher than for those working in all other healthcare groups, such as technicians and administrators. Healthcare worker coverage also was significantly higher among those 60 or older (74.2 percent)—who are at higher risk of complications—compared to those aged 18 to 29 years (56.4 percent) and 30 to 44 years (57.8 percent). No significant differences in coverage were observed by race/ethnicity. However, influenza vaccination coverage among healthcare workers still remains below the Healthy People 2020 target of 90 percent.

There are numerous reasons for vaccinating healthcare workers against influenza. First and
foremost is the obvious benefit of protecting both workers and patients from a vaccine-preventable illness with a vaccine that is safe and effective. And, of course, vaccination of healthcare workers—who are usually healthy adults—is particularly helpful in reducing transmission to certain patient populations that are at greater risk for serious complications, such as the immuno-compromised, the very young or the elderly.

Various studies have documented significant reduced risk of influenza for hospitalized patients and nursing home residents where healthcare workers were vaccinated. A recent paper by the Society for Health Epidemiology of America (SHEA) showed a 43 percent reduced influenza risk among hospitalized patients and a 60 percent risk reduction among nursing home patients when healthcare workers were vaccinated.

This flu season, up to 20 percent of the U.S. population will get the flu, 200,000 will be hospitalized and 36,000 will die. Vaccination, along with frequent washing of hands, covering coughs and sneezes and staying home when sick will greatly reduce the risk of transmitting flu to patients.

I want to remind our healthcare partners not to forget these basics—protect yourself, your family and your patients this flu season by getting a flu shot.

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