

## Mandatory flu shots ordered for Fresno County hospital workers

By Barbara Anderson



Flu shots have been mandated for all hospital workers in Fresno County by the county's interim health officer, Dr. Kenneth Bird.

### AP FILE PHOTO

Hospital workers in Fresno County will roll up their sleeves for flu shots or have to wear face masks this fall to comply with a new public health order.

The county is the first in the central San Joaquin Valley to require an annual influenza vaccination for health-care workers in acute-care hospitals.

But other Valley counties could soon follow.

Madera County is drafting a similar order, Von Do-Reynoso, the county's health director, said last week.

Last year, Fresno County recommended hospitals make flu shots a requirement — but stopped short of ordering them. But the re-emergence of the H1N1 (swine-flu) strain spurred the vaccination mandate. Twenty-two people died from the flu and another 18 were hospitalized in intensive care units in the last flu season.

Dr. Kenneth Bird, the county's interim health officer, issued the order Sept. 12 for acute-care hospitals to require flu vaccination for hospital workers. The order includes volunteers, doctors and other providers on the hospital's medical staff.

Health workers must get a shot by Dec. 15. People can exempt themselves from flu shots for medical, religious or other reasons — but they must then wear masks while working in patient care areas.

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Studies indicate that flu-shot mandates "significantly increase the rates of vaccination in facilities," Bird said, and such orders have the support of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the California Conference of Local Health Officers. Fresno County's order is similar to ones in about 20 other California counties, he said.

Getting health workers vaccinated has been a nationwide focus since 2009 when the H1N1 pandemic swept across the United States, but California does not mandate flu shots for health workers. It requires only that hospitals offer the vaccine; if employees decline, they must wear masks.

Many hospitals — on their own — have created flu-shot policies for their work force that require shots, but overall vaccination rates in hospitals remain low, Bird said in a briefing report to the Fresno County Board of Supervisors last week.

"The purpose of this order or mandate is actually to assist hospitals to increase their influenza vaccination rates of their employees or staff," Bird said Thursday.

Hospitals aren't fighting the mandate.

Bird said he met with infection-control leaders in August before issuing the flu-shot order. "There were no objections, in fact, there were a couple who said this would assist them."

The county's edict has the support of Dr. Dee Lacy, an infectious disease specialist at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Fresno.

"We've been lobbying the county for many years, trying to get them to take this step," Lacy said. Without a mandate, Lacy said Kaiser could not make flu shots "a condition of employment."

The hospital had encouraged workers to be vaccinated, Lacy said, and last year the overall vaccination rate was 80.3%. But at other hospitals in the Kaiser system that have flu-shot mandates, the rates are as high as 96.7%, she said.

Bird's health order also is having an influence at hospitals beyond Fresno County borders.

"We're going to take advantage of this Fresno County order," said Kathy Palusko, director of infection prevention and control for the Adventist Health Central Valley Network. The health system operates hospitals in Selma and Reedley in Fresno County, but also has a hospital in Hanford in Kings County, which does not have a mandate.

Adventist hospitals have had the lowest vaccination rates in the Valley. According to state reports for 2012-13, the rates ranged from 51.8% at the hospital in Reedley to 43% for the hospitals in Selma and Hanford.

An order to get a shot or wear a mask "seems to be what really has helped hospitals get their vaccination rate into the 90s," Palusko said.

That has been the case at Saint Agnes Medical Center in northeast Fresno.

The hospital boosted its vaccination rate from 55.3% in 2011-12 to 93.3% in 2012-13, the first year it imposed a flu-shot policy for workers.

"We just felt it was very, very important to protect our patients and to protect one another, said Kelley Sanchez, a Saint Agnes spokeswoman.

And other hospitals have instituted policies to good results.

Madera Community saw its worker vaccination rate increase from 53% in 2011-12 to 90.4% in 2012-13. And Children's Hospital Central California in Madera County saw almost 100% compliance last year when it made

vaccination mandatory, said Dr. David Christensen, chief medical officer.

Kaweah Delta Medical Center in Visalia required vaccination for all employees, doctors and volunteers last year and reached a 91.1% vaccination rate, said Jeff Cowley, employee health services manager. He expects to have 95% of workers vaccinated this year.

Bird said he hopes the flu-shot order will result in at least 90% of hospital workers in Fresno County getting vaccinations.

It's important for the safety of everyone — not just hospital workers and their patients, he said. Studies show that when more health-care workers are vaccinated, communities have less influenza.

People can exempt themselves from flu shots for medical, religious or other reasons.

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