

Commissioner Poonam Alaigh, M.D.
Press Conference
CentraState Medical Center
Nov. 1, 2010

Thank you very much, John.

It's a pleasure to be at CentraState Medical Center today.

Congratulations on being named one of the nation's "most wired" health care organizations by the journal of the American Hospital Association. You are ahead of the curve in this new era of electronic healthcare and I am looking forward to getting an overview of your Health Information Technology capabilities when I take a tour a little later.

I'm glad to see so many healthcare workers here ready to literally roll up their sleeves to prevent the spread of the flu this fall and winter.

Vaccination is the first and best way to protect against flu.

While the Department's main focus during flu season is to encourage the public to protect themselves against the flu by getting a flu shot, I'm here today to ensure that our message fully penetrates through the ranks of the health care professionals we rely on to protect and treat vulnerable patients.

Each year, between five and 29 percent of the population gets the flu; more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu-related complications, and between 3,000 and 49,000 people die from flu-related causes.

Pregnant women and people with chronic diseases such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), diabetes, heart disease and neurologic conditions are at higher risk of serious flu-related complications and even death.

During last year's H1N1 pandemic, the number of cases and deaths was similar to what we might expect during a traditional flu season. But, unlike a typical flu season, healthy children and adults were disproportionately affected by H1N1.

Fortunately, the pandemic was relatively mild and one of the main reasons was that the public was informed. The messages were clear and consistent across the board – not only in New Jersey, but the rest of the country as well.

Healthy people who are infected with influenza virus—including those who are asymptomatic—can transmit influenza virus to persons at higher risk for complications from influenza.

No one understands this better than all of you. You know how fast the flu and other infectious diseases can spread in health care settings.

If health care professionals get sick from the flu, it not only puts your patients, co-workers and families at risk, it creates a stress on the workplace.

Vaccination is the first and most important step physicians, nurses, and health care workers can take to protect themselves, their co-workers, their patients and their families against the flu.

And according to the CDC, studies conducted in health care settings show that when a lot of health care workers get vaccinated, vulnerable patients are protected.

Traditionally, health care workers do not have high rates of flu vaccination – at least not as high as we would like them to be.

Until last year, overall influenza vaccination coverage among health care providers never exceeded 49 percent in any one season.

Last winter, 37 percent of health care workers received an H1N1 shot and 62 percent received a seasonal flu shot. And 64 percent received either an H1N1 shot or a seasonal flu shot. While this represents a higher coverage rate than in any previous season, only 35 percent reported receiving both vaccines.

But I know that the health care staff here at CentraState Medical Center has a very good flu vaccination rate. And I am looking forward to hearing about some of the activities and methods used to achieve this.

I applaud all of you for getting your flu shot today and I urge you to join me in serving as ambassadors of good public health by encouraging your family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and patients to protect themselves by getting a flu shot this year.