

Education offered as vaccine alternative

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Nancy Frazier O'Brien/CNS

WASHINGTON — It's not a problem that Congress has been able to solve.

But Catholic hospitals and other health institutions have been playing a central role in dealing with the shortage of influenza vaccine that has left many communities scrambling to find solutions for their most vulnerable populations — the elderly, children under 2, pregnant women and those with chronic illnesses.

The crisis arose in early October when Chiron Corp. of San Francisco announced that because of a contamination problem at its manufacturing plant in England it was withdrawing its Fluvirin vaccine, leaving only enough to vaccinate about a third of those Americans to whom the vaccine is usually targeted.

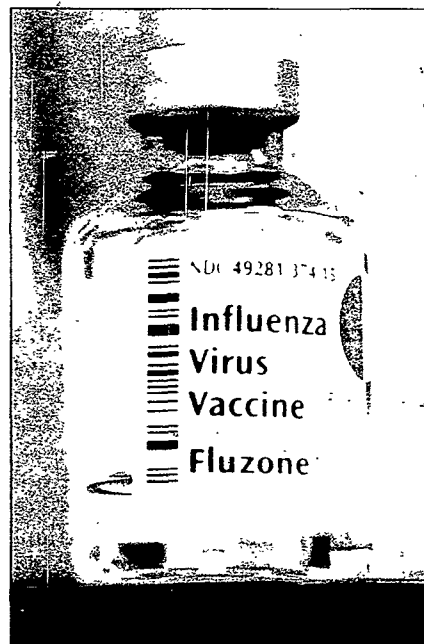
During a recent conference call sponsored by the Catholic Health Association, ethicists working for Catholic health-care systems said decisions on allocating a scarce resource like flu vaccines must be based on an ethical discernment process rooted in justice, fairness and a measure of common sense.

Mark Repenshek, health-care ethicist at Columbia St. Mary's in Glendale, Wis., and Joseph Piccione, corporate director for mission integration for OSF Healthcare System in Peoria, Ill., were among the conference-call participants who said their organizations were offering education as the best response to the vaccine shortage.

The Monroe Clinic, a Catholic health system in Monroe, Wis., sponsored by the Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes, initiated a program called "Good Health Manners" to help people protect themselves and prevent the spread of germs that caused not only influenza but other airborne illnesses such as colds, pertussis, SARS and meningitis.

The program's key points, distributed on fliers and bookmarks, include instructions to:

- Cover your mouth and nose when sneezing or coughing.
- Discard tissues into the trash.
- Wash hands immediately with soap and water or use an alcohol hand sanitizer.
- Stay home if you are feeling ill.
- See your doctor if you have a fever and cough.
- Take all medications as prescribed.



Reuters/CNS

A vial of flu vaccine sits on the counter of a medical center in Great Neck, N.Y., in late October. Catholic hospitals and other health institutions have been playing a central role in dealing with a nationwide shortage of flu vaccine that has left many communities scrambling to find solutions for their most vulnerable populations.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers those simple tips and more.

"Other good habits, such as getting plenty of sleep, engaging in physical activity, managing stress, drinking water and eating good food, will help you stay healthy in the winter and all year," says the CDC announcement. "In addition, antiviral medications are available for influenza and can be used to prevent influenza and to treat the flu if they are started in the first two days of the illness."

Another flu vaccine option for healthy individuals between the ages of 5 and 49 is the nasal-spray flu vaccine FluMist. It is not recommended, however, for health-care workers who care for patients with severely compromised immune systems and cannot be given to pregnant women.

In a typical year, 5 to 20 percent of Americans get the flu, with more than 200,000 people admitted to hospitals with flu-related illnesses and about 36,000 people dying.

The 1918 Spanish flu pandemic affected 20 to 40 percent of the world's population and killed more than 50 million people, including 675,000 in the United States.

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