



NEWS RELEASE

Flu Season Ahead

Pharmacists Urge Government to Broaden Flu Shot Access as Nasty Flu Season Looms, Encourage Residents to Get Their Flu Shots

October 19, 2017 (St. John's, NL): As flu season looms, the Pharmacists' Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL) expressed concern today about the potential impacts of low influenza vaccination rates in the province, coupled with the potential of a particularly virulent flu season in the weeks and months ahead. Newfoundland and Labrador has the second lowest flu vaccination rate in the country and, in addition, limited access for publicly funded vaccines when compared to other provinces. PANL President Steve Gillingham today urged the Provincial Government to implement a collaborative approach for offering funded flu shots via public health clinics, physician offices and pharmacies to increase immunization rates.

"The immunization rate for influenza in this province is abysmal," said Mr. Gillingham. "Indications are that this upcoming flu season could be very nasty – with Australia and other areas in the Southern Hemisphere already having one of the worst flu seasons in history, with increased cases of influenza, more hospitalization and a greater number of deaths. Influenza is a very serious disease and we should be doing everything we can to encourage patients to get immunized by creating more avenues for them to access the flu shot, as opposed to what the current Provincial Government is doing in limiting the options for residents in getting immunized. I urge the Health Minister and his government to reconsider their stance on the provincial flu immunization program."

In every other province where pharmacists can deliver flu shots, all residents or large segments of the population can receive their flu shots for free at physician offices, pharmacies and public health clinics – the choice is up to the patient. In Newfoundland and Labrador, due to lack of government funding, unless residents hold a public drug program card or have private insurance coverage for flu shots, they must pay a fee at a pharmacy, which includes the cost and administration of the vaccine. This problem is further compounded this year by government's decision to decrease access to flu shots via physician offices.

"We are very concerned with the impacts of limited access to flu shots on residents of our province this year, particularly when our population has such high rates of chronic disease and is, therefore, more susceptible to serious side effects and complications from influenza, including death," said Glenda Power, Executive Director of PANL. "Many people who work shifts, hold 9-5 positions, care for others during the day or otherwise have demanding schedules need flexibility in where and when to get immunized. There is no more accessible health care provider than the pharmacists in community pharmacies, many of which are open nights and weekends, throughout every region of our province."

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu shot each year. The National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) recommends that all people six months of age and older get vaccinated against the flu every year. During the 2016-2017 flu season in Newfoundland and Labrador, there were 517 laboratory-confirmed cases of influenza,

202 hospitalizations, 29 ICU admissions and 13 deaths reported. In Canada, influenza causes 12,200 hospitalizations and 3500 deaths annually.

PANL encourages every resident to talk with their community pharmacist about the importance of getting immunized against influenza.

“Getting the flu shot is hands down the best way to protect yourself and those around you from the serious disease of influenza,” said Mr. Gillingham. “Many community pharmacies throughout the province provide flu shots – patients with a NLPDP drug card can receive their flu shots at no cost. Other patients may be covered under private insurance. Check with your pharmacist for more information.”

PANL is the voice of pharmacists, with membership including over 700 pharmacists, 160 pharmacy students and 130 pharmacies. PANL advocates for pharmacists as leaders and professionals who work collaboratively with other healthcare providers to deliver quality health services to all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

For more information on flu symptoms and what to do if you become ill: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/flu-influenza/symptoms-flu-influenza.html>

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