

Protect employees and profits through flu prevention

Promoting holistic alternatives will have positive impact on workplace

| BY KAREN RASMUSSEN |

IT'S TOO EARLY to tell how serious the flu outbreak will be this winter, but one thing is for certain: The flu season can have a significant impact on a company's workforce.

Every year, 10 to 25 per cent of Canadians may contract the flu, according to Health Canada. Absences due to illness and employees coming to work sick can impact productivity as well as an employee's ability to function at his full potential.

With companies facing these challenges, many organizations have set up formal on-site flu immunization programs to safeguard employees.

At least 70 per cent of Canadian companies offer employees a flu immunization program, according to the 2011 *Buffet National Report* by the Sun Life Wellness Institute. Companies rate the immunization programs as the top wellness initiatives, followed by smoking cessation.

With flu clinics reaching the highest demand in October and November, many organizations plan in the summer months to ensure they have access to the limited private vaccine.

Dwindling numbers

Despite these well-planned efforts, companies report a dwindling number of employees electing to have the flu shot. Only 24 per cent of people over the age of 12 actually receive the flu shot, according to a recent numbers from Statistics Canada.

For those who don't get the shot, the report cited the rationale as follows:

- 75 per cent said they "did not think it was necessary"
 - 13 per cent said they "had not gotten around to it"
 - seven per cent said they "are fearful."
- The definition of "fear" was not specified.

The reasons people have for deciding

to not get the flu shot are vast. Consumers are becoming much more educated and diligent in their research — and much more critical in their decisions around immunization.

"People are often afraid to get the flu shot," says Meera Gupta, president of TLC Nursing, a Toronto-based nursing agency administering the flu shot to corporations. "The stream of information in the media and health news can be overwhelming and has produced uncertainty and fear in the minds of the consumers."

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As a result, companies are in need of improved strategies to increase participation and protect their greatest asset.

A focus on prevention and holistic health are the latest trends for organizations.

Holistic options

Forward-thinking companies complement their annual flu vaccine clinic by providing holistic-based options to employees. In addition to the traditional pharmaceutical offering, several locations have begun using a natural immune booster in lieu, administered by a naturopathic physician. This gives employees a choice while educating them on the preventative measures important in fighting the viruses.

For example, the TELUS flu prevention campaign includes an awareness campaign in addition to vaccinations. It



encourages team members to be healthy and adopt behaviours that will help them be more resilient to flu, such as washing their hands more frequently.

"Cultivating sustainable workplace wellness initiatives through a more holistic approach to health is key to achieving a healthier workforce," says Jaty Tam, naturopathic doctor and co-founder of Toronto-based Well Street Health.

"Boosting the immune system and improving the body's ability to defend itself against a viral attack is the best and most effective protection against all flu and cold viruses," Tam says. "The more employees have access to information to strengthen their health, the more a company can safeguard their employees' health and their profits."

With flu season lasting until April, companies will be in a greater position to minimize the negative impact of the flu on their workplace by offering employees stronger prevention strategies. Information that encourages employees to be healthier and adopt new behaviours through a more holistic approach to wellness will benefit many areas of the workplace.

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