

# County of Santa Clara

## Public Health Department



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### MEMORANDUM

**Date:** January 26, 2012

**To:** Hospitals, Ambulatory and Community Clinics, Long-term  
and Other Healthcare Facilities

**From:** Marty Fenstersheib, MD, MPH  
Health Officer

**Subject:** Notification of Health Officer Order for Upcoming 2012 – 2013 Influenza Season

I am writing to urge healthcare worker influenza vaccination or masking this season, and to inform you of **my intention later this year to issue a Health Officer order for next year's influenza season. The order will mandate masking during the flu season for all healthcare workers in hospitals or healthcare facilities in Santa Clara County who decline influenza vaccination.**

I know we share a common goal: to protect our community and our patients by preventing spread of communicable diseases like influenza. The good news is that influenza activity has been light thus far this year. So even if influenza vaccination rates are below your goal for this year, there is still time to improve vaccination rates and protect your patients.

Influenza infection is a serious illness, accounting for an estimated 36,000 excess deaths in the US each year, 90% of which are in persons > 65 years of age. Healthcare workers are both at risk for influenza AND can transmit the virus to their vulnerable patients. An influenza outbreak in one of our local long-term care facilities several years back resulted in two deaths and four hospitalizations despite the fact that the patient vaccination rate was near 100%. Ill staff – only 17% of whom were vaccinated – introduced influenza into the facility, where it then spread to patients.

Influenza vaccination of healthcare workers saves money by reducing employee absenteeism during influenza season, and the current law in California requires acute care hospitals to offer the influenza vaccine to employees at no cost. We know that immunization requirements increase immunization rates. However, under the current law, a high proportion of hospital healthcare workers sign a declination statement in lieu of vaccination, so actual vaccination rates of healthcare workers in many facilities are below that which will blunt spread of infection. Mandatory vaccination or masking policies may increase healthcare worker vaccination rates to > 95%.

Board of Supervisors: Mike Wasserman, George Shirakawa, Dave Cortese, Ken Yeager, Liz Kniss  
County Executive: Jeffrey V. Smith

Prevention of influenza infection and further transmission requires a layered strategy. We already have some of those layers in place, but we need to do more. As you may know, several counties in California have issued mandates requiring vaccination or masking of all healthcare workers during influenza season. **I plan to issue a similar mandate next summer to take effect during the 2012-2013 influenza season.**

For this season, I strongly recommend that you continue to urge all employees with patient contact to be vaccinated against influenza. For those who decline or have a contraindication to vaccine, I recommend that they wear a mask when in contact with patients for the duration of the influenza season. Many institutions across the country are going even further and making flu vaccine a condition of employment. Examples of mandates in practice are listed at <http://www.immunize.org/honor-roll/>.

I appreciate your support of these efforts.

MF:cw