H1N1 vaccine shortage and distribution mismanagement

It has been a very poorly managed flu vaccine distribution so far this year. There had been a tremendous build-up that it was going to be a bad year for the flu and the H1N1 virus. Over a year ago this was discussed at the Public Health Council, and several reports and presentations were made to the members of the Council month after month. (The Public Health Council is an advisory body appointed by the Governor and governed by their own bylaws at the Department of Health in Madison).

Now that the flu illness has affected the residents of the state, the expected vaccine is not available. The authorities that predicted the flu outbreak are justifying their inadequacy by saying that the vaccine is in short supply, as only 1 supplier makes it and more doses are on the way.

As a doctor, I had to go to another facility to get my shot. Normally, people will come to the doctor’s office for vaccination, now they are going to hardware stores, pharmacies, public health clinics, and banks to get their shots. Goldman Sachs and Menards are giving seasonal influenza shots while doctors are given the rhetoric of short supply. I used to get 500 seasonal influenza vaccine doses for my patients. This year, considering a bigger outbreak of flu, I had ordered larger quantities. I received nothing.

There have been 4000 deaths and 40,000 hospital admissions in the United States so far related to the H1N1 virus. Twenty million doses of the H1N1 vaccine were promised to be delivered in October and it fell short by 3 million. The production of the vaccine is not going as planned, but the manufacturer predicts that 77 million doses of the vaccine will be available by the end of this year. It is estimated that 159 million Americans are at high risk for H1N1 flu, and only 94 million doses will be available for distribution.

The federal government trusted the state health departments to manage and distribute the vaccine, and so far they have failed. Patients do not go to hardware stores for their health care, but they are the ones giving flu shots, while doctors’ offices like mine are answering frantic patient phone calls with a single phrase: “We don’t have the vaccine yet; please call back in a few days.”

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