

Missed Opportunities for Influenza Vaccination and Its Serious Consequences

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Letter to Editor

During the flu season, epidemics of this disease result in a significantly higher hospitalization and death rates. Annual vaccination is the most effective strategy for preventing influenza infection and its complications. Although it is recommended that previously unvaccinated hospitalized patients, are offered the opportunity – and, indeed, encouraged – to be vaccinated before discharge, studies show that these opportunities are often missed [1,2].

To ascertain the characteristics of these missed opportunities, a descriptive study was conducted including all confirmed, severe, hospitalized cases during the 2013/14 flu season. Using the national Public Health definition, severe case was considered as: hospitalized patient with polymerase chain reaction positive test for Influenza, and pneumonia, respiratory distress syndrome, multiple organ failure, septic shock or intensive care unit admission. Information about visits of these patients to the health care centres was collected retrospectively. All visits from the date that vaccination was available up to two weeks before the onset of flu-like symptoms were recorded.

Twenty-one patients were included. The mean patient age was 59.4 years; 95% confidence interval (CI 95%): 51.5-67.2 years. Ten patients (47.6%) were male. Mean hospitalization was 14.8 days; CI 95%: 2.8-26.8 days; five cases were subtype An/H1N1 (23.8%); two (9.5%) were A/H3N2; and fourteen (66.7%) were A, not subtyped. Five patients (23.8%) died during hospitalization; sixteen (76.2%) met vaccination criteria but only five (31.3%) of them had been previously vaccinated in the flu season. Four (36.4%) of the eleven previously unvaccinated patients that met the vaccination criteria had visited health centres on a total of six occasions for non-flu related causes during the period studied: two patients did it twice and the other two in one occasion. These visits were: one to primary care centre, three to the emergency department and two were hospital admissions.

Several factors have been associated with missed opportunities for Influenza vaccination in patients at risk of complications. These include patients' unawareness that they could be vaccinated during hospitalization [3], or that they belonged to a risk group [4,5]. One of the most important factors associated with patients' intention to be vaccinated is a doctor's recommendation [3]. Thus, it is our belief that if the patient's condition permits this, doctors should recommend vaccine against Influenza virus to those patients for whom it is indicated, at any healthcare visit or hospitalization period during the flu season [2,3]. Failure to do so means missing an important opportunity to prevent serious flu complications, including death.

References

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