

Seasonal Vaccine Supply Flags Amid High Demand

By Susan J. Boutwell

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A dwindling supply of seasonal flu vaccine has caused the cancellation of a number of clinics in the Upper Valley, even as public health workers gear up for school-based H1N1 inoculations of children, some of which will begin next week.

All of the remaining seasonal flu clinics run by the Visiting Nurse Association & Hospice of Vermont and New Hampshire have been cancelled, Mt. Ascutney Hospital and Health Center in Windsor called off a clinic on Thursday but has one scheduled for today and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center officials last night cancelled a Nov. 1 clinic and said their final clinic, on Nov. 14, is at best "tentative." Earlier in the week DHMC cancelled a clinic that had been set for tomorrow.

"We're seeing uncertainty about deliveries and quantities ordered. It's very challenging to make commitments going forward," said Dave Evancich, vice president of public affairs at DHMC.

Well-attended hospital clinics coupled with seasonal flu vaccine shortages at DHMC, Alice Peck Day Memorial Hospital in Lebanon, Mt. Ascutney and Gifford Medical Center in Randolph led to a run on shots at the VNA, said Gaye LaCasce, vice president of development and community relations for the Lebanon-based organization.

"It's the trickle-down effect," she said. "People were panicking and thinking they weren't going to be able to get a seasonal flu shot and were coming to us."

Clinics scheduled by the Newport-based Connecticut Valley Home Care and Lake Sunapee Region VNA & Hospice of New London are among those still on for the coming weeks.

Connecticut Valley Home Care began holding clinics several weeks after the other groups and as a result has more of the seasonal vaccine in hand, said Elaine Bussey, the organization's director. Still, she said, the organization has given out more than half its 850 inoculations and isn't halfway through its clinics.

Public health workers say the demand for seasonal flu vaccines skyrocketed due to concern over the H1N1

flu, also known as swine flu, which started infecting people in the spring. Months of warnings about this two-flu season led to much greater awareness about influenza in general, they say.

It's unclear how much demand remains for seasonal flu vaccines. DHMC has given out 26,000 flu shots in about six weeks, fewer than the 32,000 given out last year in more than double the time frame. The VNA's 1,500 shots this year about equal the amount given out all of last year's flu season.

Health officials theorize that more people came out, more quickly, for seasonal shots this year. With vaccine manufacturers now switched to H1N1 production, there may not be enough seasonal vaccine to inoculate the late-comers.

And now health care planners are wondering how much H1N1 vaccine they'll receive.

"We're getting smaller shipments than what we ordered," said Alex Jaccaci, director of organizational improvement and planning at Alice Peck Day. The plan currently is not to advertise H1N1 clinics until the vaccines are available, he said.

National health officials originally predicted 120 million doses would be available from manufacturers by now. That number was downgraded to 40 million and last week to about 30 million doses of vaccine available by the end of October. So far, about 15 million doses have been made available. U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius told a Senate hearing on Wednesday that there would be enough vaccine for every American.

In the Upper Valley, swine flu vaccinations of the general public haven't yet been set, with New Hampshire and Vermont planners saying there are no firm dates for open clinics due to questions about supply of the vaccine.

LaCasce said she thinks the region's first few clinics may need police officers on hand "to make sure it's an orderly and safe process" as early clinics could attract residents vying for a scarce commodity.

Vermont this week joined 41 other states, including New Hampshire, with confirmed "widespread" H1N1 flu cases, according to the state Department of Public Health. Some northern Vermont hospitals are restricting visitors in an attempt to keep patients from contracting the flu, but there haven't been reports of such restrictions in Upper Valley institutions.

Upper Valley school officials aren't seeing widespread absenteeism due to the flu, although the list of ill students seems to be growing. Just over 10 percent of the 430 students at Richmond Middle School in Hanover were out sick yesterday, up from just under 4 percent three days earlier.

“A lot of us are worried about it,” said Principal Jim Nourse. “On the other hand ... it’s a flu like any other flu as far as (the ill pupils) have been concerned.”

Mary Beth Stocken of Hanover yesterday had two sons, ages 11 and 13, home with the flu. Her six-year-old hadn’t caught the bug and Stocken, pushing the younger boy in a shopping cart on their way into Wal-Mart, said her older sons’ cases had been mild. The boys had had an opportunity for flu shots a week earlier at a routine doctor’s visit, Stocken said, but they didn’t get the inoculations.

“My husband doesn’t believe in getting them,” she said.

Cases of influenza-like illness have begun to decline at Dartmouth College, where a total of 268 cases have been diagnosed since Sept. 22. Last week there were 33 new cases, down from 65 the week before and more than 100 the previous week. None of the students has required hospitalization, according to Dr. Jack Turco, director of health services at the college.

There have been no flu fatalities at DHMC, said Kathy Kirkland, an epidemiologist there. She said the flu that has sickened people is likely the H1N1 flu, as there haven’t been reports of seasonal flu circulating yet nationwide.

Kirkland said DHMC staffers are expecting to see hospitalization of flu sufferers, most with other health complications, in the coming weeks. She also said they are expecting to hear about growing numbers of sick children.

“We’re expecting cases in our schools any time,” she said.

To head that off, most of the region’s schools have scheduled H1N1 vaccine clinics. School officials have sent home forms for parents to register their children for the clinics. Some begin as early as Monday, said Becky Thomas, director of the Vermont Department of Health’s White River Junction and Springfield districts. She said interest in some schools is as high as 75 to 80 percent of pupils.

The Hartford School District had a swine flu clinic scheduled for Thursday, but cancelled because the vaccine wasn’t yet available. Two clinics are now set for Nov. 23 and 24.

School clinics run by the Greater Sullivan County Public Health Network, which serves 15 communities including Claremont, will begin in mid-November, said Jessica McAuliff, the group’s director.

The region’s only residents to have received H1N1 vaccines to date are those in high-risk groups, including pregnant women, healthcare workers and emergency medical personnel, and caregivers and people in contact with children under six months of age — who are too young for the vaccines.

When H1N1 vaccines become available for the general population, New Hampshire residents will be able to sign up for clinics to be held at the vacant School Street School in Lebanon. The dates of the clinics won't be made public because officials want to be sure they have enough vaccine on hand and will give shots only to those who have registered, said Lebanon Fire Chief Chris Christopoulos, who is helping direct the public health effort in the Upper Valley.

He said registration information will be widely advertised well in advance of the clinic dates.

"When we're going to have enough vaccine to give to the general public is up in the air right now," he said. "We had been told to be ready for clinics in early November, but that's been pushed out a bit because of availability."

Clinics for residents in the Greater Sullivan County Network will be held at Claremont Middle School, Charlestown Primary School, New London Middle School and Newport High School, also on dates not yet set, said McAuliff.

On the Vermont side, plans aren't yet firm for general public clinics, said Thomas.

"After the school clinics, we don't know," she said. "It will depend on the supply, what we have left. ... It's kind of a guessing game."

The Washington Post and Associated Press contributed to this report.

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