Dear Directors of Nursing and Care Managers

NSW Health is warning Directors and Care Managers to be on high alert for signs and symptoms of influenza. NSW is currently experiencing a severe influenza season with 3 influenza viruses co-circulating. The dominant circulating virus is influenza A (H3N2) which is more likely to affect the elderly. Already a number of aged care facilities have reported influenza outbreaks across NSW in recent weeks, particularly in Sydney and Newcastle. It is important to ensure all residents and staff have received this year’s vaccine.

Influenza is an acute, highly infectious respiratory viral infection and is a notifiable disease in all states and territories if laboratory confirmed. As an organisation that provides services to older people, I encourage you to protect your staff and residents from serious or life-threatening illnesses associated with influenza. To help prevent outbreaks and spread of influenza, you should;

- Ensure your staff have good hand hygiene and infection control practices in place.
- Advise family members and visitors who are unwell with influenza-like symptoms not to visit residents.
- Signage should be placed at the entrances of all facilities to alert families not to enter the facility if unwell.
- Staff with influenza-like symptoms should also be advised to stay away from work until they are symptom-free or are cleared by their doctor to return to work.

Unlike the rest of Australia the dominant circulating influenza strain in NSW is influenza A (H3N2) (this is not the pandemic strain), this is the subtype generally associated with more severe influenza seasons. Residents are more likely to be affected by this type of influenza and are particularly at risk of developing complications. It is important for staff to be alert for signs and symptoms of influenza in residents remembering that residents may not always present with fever.

If you suspect an influenza outbreak in your facility it is important to notify your local public health unit. Public health units will be able to assist you with collection of swabs and help implement correct infection control procedures. Public health units will also be able to help with access to antivirals for both treatment and prophylaxis of residents and staff.

Four essential interventions for the prevention and management of influenza outbreaks in residential aged care homes are:

1. Vaccination of residents and staff
2. Application of appropriate infection control practices
3. Outbreak recognition and management (including laboratory confirmation)
4. Notify your Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055
Are you prepared for an outbreak of flu?

- Do you have an influenza vaccination program to encourage high rates of vaccinations for your residents?
- Are resident vaccination records updated regularly?
- Do you have an influenza vaccination program for your staff?
- Are staff vaccination records updated regularly?
- Do you have an updated infection control plan in place?
- Do you know who to contact in case of an outbreak of influenza in your residential aged care home?
- Do your staff understand and carry out correct hand hygiene and infection control practices?
- Do you have a system to ensure that family and friends are notified in case of an outbreak of influenza?

You should have received from NSW Health an influenza package in June of this year, within this package is signage and the 10 step process to identifying influenza outbreaks. These are supplied to help facilities promote awareness about respiratory hygiene and assist staff in identifying and what to do during a respiratory/influenza outbreak. More copies are available through your public health unit or visit the NSW Health website.

Health advice and information is available from your local public health unit on 1300 066 055
For a range of health information, go online
- NSW Influenza page for residential care facilities
- Department of Health resources please go to Flu Kit

Yours sincerely

Dr Vicky Sheppeard

Director, Communicable Diseases Branch

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