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Statement in Support of Universal Influenza Vaccination for Healthcare and Educational Setting Personnel

October 2, 2020

The Rural Association of Northern California Health Officers (RANCHO) is deeply concerned regarding the upcoming influenza season and its possible impact on our healthcare system during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

In spite of the well-established safety and efficacy of the influenza (“flu”) vaccine, too few people get vaccinated each year. This is true even in challenging work environments such as face to face educational settings and healthcare facilities. The evidence supporting universal influenza vaccination is overwhelming and in other parts of the world where vaccination is widely accepted by the populace, there are fewer influenza cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

RANCHO feels it is important to bring to everyone’s attention the critical need for vaccination this fall among area residents and especially among healthcare workers and school staff. While we always recommend that all members of the public get flu vaccination annually, this fall in particular we are most concerned about these particular groups. Since early reopening this summer and fall, schools and colleges around the nation have seen significant transmission of coronavirus. Healthcare workers are at increased risk of acquiring and transmitting both influenza and coronavirus, and some of our most distressing coronavirus outbreaks have occurred in healthcare settings. We recognize that these same settings are historically places where influenza is easily transmitted as well.

We also recognize that with COVID-19 prevention measures in place, it is possible that we will see a reduction in influenza cases compared to previous years. The flu season in Australia this summer, for example, was mild but it is important to point out that this success was likely attributable to both a vigorous campaign to raise vaccination rates and implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures. The combination of influenza and coronavirus circulating at the same time this year will not only make diagnosis challenging (since the two have similar symptoms) and increase demands on testing, but it will likely threaten our healthcare system’s capacity to provide care for everyone who needs it, when they need it. Reducing flu cases as much as possible makes diagnosis easier, and preserves the ability to continue to care for all.

With that in mind, **we strongly recommend that all high risk work environments** for influenza transmission, especially those in the healthcare and educational settings, **strengthen workplace policies** to ensure that staff are vaccinated for their own protection and the protection of members of the public. Some counties within our group have even written public health orders to this end. The traditional fallback of wearing a surgical mask for those who refuse vaccination is inadequate at a time when mask-wearing indoors is nearly universal. We are in agreement that the need for widespread influenza vaccination is critical this year, and we support both our joint and independent efforts to achieve that goal.

Universal flu vaccination for everyone 6 months and older will make our communities safer for everyone this fall and winter, particularly those most vulnerable to serious complications of both influenza and coronavirus.