

5 ways Boston Children's Hospital helps staff deal with the flu

This proactive, comprehensive approach makes sure staff is prepared for its patients.

By Kristin Erikson | Posted: February 11, 2013

With flu season in full swing, health communicators everywhere are scrambling to disseminate fact sheets, posters and press releases about how to prevent the spread of flu and what to do if you catch it. But as a health communicator who manages internal communications for the Emergency Management (EM) Department at Boston Children's Hospital, I've learned that hospital staff need access to information beyond how to properly cover your cough; they also need to know how to quickly respond to an influx of patients with the flu in a way that minimizes operational disruption.

In my role as a communications specialist for EM, I am responsible for providing resources to help those managing disruptive hospital events—like an influx of flu patients—be more effective. Boston Children's internal Flu Central website aims to do just that. The site is intended for hospital staff and is only available internally through the hospital network. In addition to providing links to vetted and approved flyers and posters with tips for preventing the spread of flu, the site also includes access to:

Clinical guidelines: Often times, clinical practice may change during an evolving event like flu outbreak. For example, an announcement was posted to Boston Children's Flu Central about how specialized testing for influenza is now available on weekends. This is helpful for clinical staff who work on Saturdays and Sundays because this specialized test is not routinely available on weekends and getting results may change bed placement decisions. Other resources to post for staff may include guidelines around infection control countermeasures (e.g. precautions), patient treatment protocols, and medication updates (e.g. Tamiflu shortage impact).

Emergency response plans: When the Emergency Department begins to overcrowd and beds for patients with the flu become scarce, staff need to turn to their Emergency Response Plans to help them quickly respond to the situation. Boston Children's Flu Central website provides direct links to the hospital's Code Help, Code Triage and Response to an Infectious Disease Event plans. Each of these plans outline strategies to respond to different problems: need for more staff, need for more space, need for more equipment, etc.

Key contacts: A number of parties are often called to the table when an emergency strikes. Rather than taking the time to look up their contact information, key contacts' pagers and phone numbers are organized within Boston Children's Flu Central website. Having all the stakeholder contacts, such as Emergency Management, Infection Control, Safety, Materials Management, Lab and Occupational Health, conveniently located in one location can be a real time saver.

Visitation guidelines: Some hospitals modify their visitation policies during flu season to reduce the risk of patients and staff becoming ill. Centralizing updated guidelines makes it easy for staff to post and disseminate the most updated and approved information. Again, this can save time and expense by enabling staff to print just the right amount of signage for their particular area. It also assures that all new signs have consistent message, branding and themes.

Other key resources (such as statistics, helpful websites, and more): Help people to stay informed and prepared by directing them to key resources, whether it's statistics on the number of residents in your area with the flu, or to websites—such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—that provide frequent updates on the 2013 influenza season.

And don't forget to measure your success. The best way to know if the resources you are posting are useful is to track them. There are a variety of free online tools that can tell you how many times a link has been clicked on or a file has been downloaded.

Overall, managing a prolonged medical event, like the flu, is ever-changing and, at times, stressful. Having all the tools you need at your fingertips is not only a time saver, but also one less thing to worry about when operating in an emergency mode.

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