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Hysteria builds, accusations fly over vaccine

Tuesday, October 19, 2004

BY ANGELA STEWART
Star-Ledger Staff

There has been no flu activity reported in New Jersey so far this season, but you wouldn't know it by the sign hanging on the door of John's Meat Market in Scotch Plains. It warns customers who might have the flu to stay away and instead have their meat delivered.

"We don't know how big this thing is going to get," said owner Vincent Losavio in defense of the sign, which he said most customers of his Park Avenue store actually appreciate.

Over in Bloomfield, meanwhile, officials are gearing up for a historic event -- a first-ever flu lottery on Thursday in which the winners will receive the town's 300 precious doses of flu vaccine. The lottery starts at 11:30 a.m. at Fire Station No. 3 on East Passaic Avenue. Of the dozens of people who called seeking information yesterday, most wanted to know how to maximize their chances of receiving a flu shot.

"It's been chaos.. this is the most fair way we have of doing this," said Trevor Weigle, the township's weary health director, stressing that only people who can prove they live in town and fall into the high-risk category are eligible to enter the lottery.

That includes persons 65 and older, pregnant women, healthcare workers involved in direct patient care and individuals 18 to 64 with underlying chronic health conditions. Be prepared to bring a doctor's note or some other proof of



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your condition, he said.

"All we are doing is taking down names of people who qualify. Next week we will be drawing the 300 names and the notifying people by mail of the date, time and location of the flu shot clinic," he explained.

So how bad are things likely to get this flu season anyway?

Well, if you believe the group representing the country's emergency physicians, pretty bad. Citing already stretched resources, leaders of the American College of Emergency Physicians pleaded with the federal government yesterday to avert a public health catastrophe by convening a crisis summit. They point out that 36,000 million Americans die of the flu in an average year and that about 200,000 require hospitalization.

"You will have people dying in waiting rooms and hallways waiting to get into beds," predicted Arthur Kellerman a board member of the college, during a press conference yesterday in San Francisco during the group's annual meeting.

Now everyone take a deep breath, said U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson. He insists there will be enough vaccine available for most people who need it.

"We want people to relax," Thompson said at a news conference in Tampa, where he urged seniors not to stand in long lines outside pharmacies and clinics to get a shot, possibly putting their health even more at risk.

All the heightened concern is resulting from the fact that nearly half the country's supply of vaccine won't be shipped out this year. Chiron Corp's 48 million doses have been shelved by the Food and Drug Administration because of contamination problems at its Liverpool, England vaccine plant. That leaves one company --Aventis Pasteur -- as the sole producer of flu vaccine this year for the U.S. market.

"What frightens me about this is that it's a glimpse into how ill-prepared we are for a biological attack. We can't even prepare for flu and we know what's coming," said Lee Clarke, an associate professor of sociology at Rutgers University.

Some New Jersey hospitals are preparing for the worst. John Brenann, senior vice president of clinical and emergency services for the Saint Barnabas Health Care System, said there is already a policy in place shifting resources within his nine-hospital system, including radiology and lab services, to emergency departments if things start to get out of hand.

"I think we have to anticipate that it is going to be bad and hope that it's not," he said.

State epidemiologist Eddy Bresnitz reminded people that doctors and local health departments should be receiving shipments of vaccine in the coming weeks as Aventis rolls out its doses. He, along with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is urging people to exercise patience.

"In most years over the past decade, the flu hasn't peaked until late January or early February. If that happens to be the case this year, there is plenty of time to get vaccinated," he said.

But just who is to blame for this year's shortage? What you believe may have a lot to do with your politics. The shortage has led to a fierce, pre-election exchange of accusations between Democrats and Republicans.



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released a campaign television advertisement highlighting the vaccine crisis and blaming the administration. Bush campaign manager Ken Mehlman has denied the administration is to blame, contending it has massively increased funding for flu preparedness.

And yesterday, Vice President Dick Cheney blamed the problem on the threat of lawsuits, the yearlong effectiveness of flu vaccines and the limited profits for drug companies that produce it.

He also argued that voting for Kerry and John Edwards -- two Democratic lawyers -- would kill medical liability reform.

Also, don't look to Canada to provide a quick fix to the flu vaccine crisis, even if it has its own surplus of the medicine, Canadian health officials warned yesterday. It will be several weeks before the government there knows if it has more vaccine than it needs.


For now, that means the frenzy over flu is only likely to intensify.

But don't forget. John's Meat Market will deliver.

Wires services contributed to this report.

Angela Stewart writes about healthcare. She can be reached by e-mail at astewart@starledger.com or bt 973 392-4178

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