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Letters Preventing flu-like illness

Reason for optimism

BMJ 2008; 336 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.39465.484421.3A> (Published 24 January 2008) Cite this as: BMJ 2008;336:172

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The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) claims that the single best way to prevent seasonal flu is to get vaccinated each year.¹ Such confidence in influenza vaccines seems misplaced for two reasons. Firstly, if CDC viral surveillance data are correct, then in recent years true influenza viruses have caused an average of only 12% of influenza-like illness² (the syndrome the public thinks of as “flu” and, most critically, the syndrome the public is trying to avoid). Since influenza vaccine does not work against non-influenza viruses,³ how can the agency responsibly claim vaccines are the best way to prevent seasonal flu?

Secondly, the track record for influenza vaccination is not stellar. Over the past years, numerous reviews have shown that the benefits of influenza vaccination have been overstated—most importantly in elderly people, the group most needing protection.

With all the focus on influenza instead of influenza-like illness, we are missing the target, pursuing a health policy that has probably placed a prolonged undue reliance on vaccination and other pharmaceutical measures—and prematurely and (now we know) illegitimately demoting the role of physical barriers such as hand washing and masks. Official US recommendations for the prevention and control of influenza are 25 000 words long.⁴ Only one sentence of that document mentions non-pharmaceutical interventions, only to brush them off as having “not been studied adequate.” Jefferson et al have reviewed the literature—and the evidence gives reason for optimism.⁵ Will policy change?

Footnotes

- Competing interests: PD knows some of the authors and had a chance to read and comment on the draft manuscript prior to publication.

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