

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: 2009 Flu Shot Misery revisited

By Stephen Somerville

With the fall season just now upon us and the opening of the hockey season this week, it is that time of year again for me to begin looking in the local papers for the ads for the public flu shot locations.

When discussing this issue with my wife the other night, we were recalling the nightmare associated with the H1N1 flu-shot back in November 2009. I'll bet many of you also recall that time without much fondness, either.

I wrote two columns about it at the time; here are some excerpts.

Two weeks ago my wife suggested that we should take our five-year old son to get the H1N1 flu-shot.

We had both read the large advertisement in the Toronto Star newspaper that stated "Flu shots will be made available first to health care workers, pregnant women, people under sixty-five years of age with chronic medical conditions, children six months to five years old, those living in remote and isolated communities, as well as people living with or caring for those at high risk who cannot be immunized".

As our son does not celebrate his sixth birthday until just after this Christmas, we therefore thought he qualified for the flu-shot. In addition, a friend of ours who has a son that is six months younger than my son had received the flu-shot the day before up in Newmarket.

The clinic at Ray Twinney in Newmarket opened at 10 am that Saturday morning. We arrived at the hockey arena at about 9:45 a.m. and there was a big lineup of people.

However, we came prepared. We were wearing our winter jackets and toques, plus we had plenty of food with us as we thought the whole process would take five to seven hours.

As well, I brought along a soccer ball and mini football to throw with Ryan.

Our line was slowly beginning to speed up and we could now see the door to the arena. We had now been in line for just over three hours and fifteen minutes.

A nurse then comes by and hands out a Flyer to everyone in line and says that they are only giving flu-shots to the priority groups identified on the Flyer.

The Flyer reads something to the effect that only "children under five years old" will receive the flu-shot.

This is at odds with what the Toronto Star advertisement said, although I did not have a copy of the Star with my at the time.

My wife asks the nurse about this situation and the nurse replies that the "flu-shot will only be given today to children that are under five years old."

As you can imagine, neither my wife nor were happy at all with this development, but there is nothing we can do, so we head home.

My question here: Why did we have to wait in line for over three hours before someone of authority came and told us this?

Everyone understands that there are shortages of the vaccine and everyone understands that there will be long line-ups. And all of us can very much appreciate the pressure the nurses and public officials are under, but the stupidity associated with the organizing of this clinic was not and is not acceptable.

Instead of any explanation, fixing the problem before we have to line up again in a few weeks would be a most welcome solution.

From my second column:

What a difference two weeks make!

I arrived at 5:50 pm and this time there were no long line-ups around the building. In fact, I walked right into the arena. There were about seventy-five people in front of me.

There seemed to be more security personnel and York Region health care staff on hand this time. The line moved fairly quickly.

I was in the room where they do the inoculations within forty minutes.

From the time I walked into the building until the time I left was just under one hour.

I had planned to end this column with something pithy like, "I guess my column did the trick!" but that would not really be fair to the health care staff.

Standing in line those two days gave me lots of time to think.

I wonder about our emergency preparedness capability. Think back to the energy blackout a couple of summers ago, or the ice storm

in eastern Ontario and Quebec.

Are our public authorities prepared for a number of different types of calamitous events or scenarios, like if an outbreak of some disease occurred?

Based on what I personally witnessed these past couple of weeks and what I saw on television and in the newspapers, I am not so sure.

We have not had an influenza outbreak like that of 2009 since. I hope and trust that our public officials learned from this event nine years ago and are prepared in case something like this happens again.

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