

IMPROVING HEALTH WITH IMMUNIZATIONS

The scheduled administration of immunizations allows providers an opportunity to offer a service that is, with little doubt, an effective means of preventive medicine along with a quality of health improvement. Our Great Plains Quality Innovation Network (QIN), serves as the Quality Innovation Network-Quality Improvement Organization for the states of Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota. It has recently been awarded the task to increase immunization rates and reduce disparities among Medicare beneficiaries in our four states. Great Plains QIN will work directly with healthcare practitioners, providers and consumers to foster improvement in this area.

While immunization rates have made fairly steady progress, influenza and pneumonia are still the 8th leading causes of death in the United States. Great Plains QIN will collaborate with physician offices and home health agencies to adopt and promote proven best practice approaches. We will focus on strengthening information exchange among state immunization registries and Immunization Information Systems (IIS) to enhance vaccine related data.

Over the next four years our goal will be for immunization rates of 70% for influenza, 90% for cumulative pneumococcus and 30% for herpes zoster among Medicare patients. It is also desired that there will be a reduction in disparities among racial and ethnic minorities as well as those who reside in rural areas. CMS aims to have one million previously unimmunized beneficiaries given pneumonia immunizations.

Depending on your practice setting and environment, giving direct immunization or else referral for the vaccine will help promote this initiative. We as providers can become so focused on acute presentation signs and symptoms or other issues of health care maintenance that we forget or neglect to inquire about or undertake strategies to improve immunization rates. It is in this area that the Great Plains Learning and Action Network (LAN) will offer an opportunity for those providers to share, learn and help each other make a measurable difference in these rates. Incorporating this into clinic work flow will allow tracking and might help assist in areas of quality reporting. Meaningful Use and the Physician Quality Reporting System (PQRS) will have measures related to immunization, and those eventually may affect reimbursement. The IIS will help meet these requirements and update the patient's immunization status.

Other areas which can offer assistance and resources include pharmacies, community health nurses, long term care facilities, Departments of Health and a host of other stakeholders who can help our Great Plains QIN achieve its goal. Patients with many of the chronic diseases like COPD and diabetes are at higher risk for pneumonia. FLU-FIT is an innovative process that combines an influenza vaccine with screening for colorectal cancer. Patient reminders and recall notices, as well as standard orders for the vaccine administration, may help improve rates.

August is Immunization Awareness Month and should remind us to not take the process for granted and to become involved in improving numbers. To join the Great Plains LAN, visit: <http://greatplainsqin.org/improving-immunization-rates/>. We look forward to helping prevent illness and avoiding unnecessary hospitalizations by partnering with patients, providers and stakeholders in our region in addressing this important issue.

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