



Department of Health

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Dear Colleagues:

It is the beginning of a new year and once again, New York is leading off with an ambitious agenda for health and wellness. In his State of the State address, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo announced several new initiatives to reverse the opioid epidemic, protect children from lead poisoning, empower health care consumers, protect New Yorkers from toxic chemicals in personal care products, and expand telehealth and emergency medical services in rural areas. I will be sharing more about these proposals with you as they are implemented.

Of particular importance this month is promoting awareness of the influenza virus. You are probably aware that influenza has been geographically widespread in New York for the last six weeks. As of January 20th, 25,137 laboratory-confirmed cases of influenza have been reported and 7,101 people have been hospitalized in New York State. One pediatric flu death has been reported. As we all know, adults over the age of 65, people with certain chronic medical conditions, young children, and pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to contracting the flu virus. As a reminder, when clinical assessment indicates the flu, initiating antiviral treatment within 48 hours of symptom onset is recommended for maximum efficacy.

While we have been hit early and hard by the flu this year, it is certainly not too late for vaccinations. Many of you may have heard reports that this year's vaccine is only ten percent effective. In fact, this statistic refers to the effectiveness of the 2017 Australian flu vaccine against a single strain: A (H3N2). The overall Australian flu vaccine effectiveness in all ages against all strains was 33%, and the effectiveness against the A (H1N1) and B strains were much higher, at 50% and 57% respectively. In addition, the point estimates in the Australian study had wide confidence intervals compared with those of the U.S. flu vaccine effectiveness studies.

U.S. preliminary flu vaccine effectiveness data will not be available until at least mid-February, however the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention currently estimates that this year's vaccine efficacy will be similar to last year's, which was 39% effective overall, 34% effective against the H3N2 component, and 56% effective against influenza B strains. Although the A (H3N2) strain has predominated so far this flu season, influenza B strains have been quite common in several regions of New York State. The flu vaccine is expected to provide greater protection against the B strains.

The flu vaccine remains the best protection against influenza, even in seasons with lower vaccine effectiveness. A 2017 study showed that the flu vaccine can significantly reduce a child's risk of dying from influenza. Please continue to offer the flu vaccine to unvaccinated patients at each clinical encounter. In addition, all patients and healthcare providers should be encouraged to practice basic control measures, such as handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home while ill.

This month's second topic is an update on medical marijuana. This month marks the second anniversary of the State's Medical Marijuana Program, which first launched on January 7, 2016. As of today, we now have 1,436 registered practitioners and 43,250 certified patients

who currently participate in the program. In just the past year, the number of participating practitioners has nearly doubled, and the number of certified patients in the program has more than tripled. From the beginning, we have been committed to growing the medical marijuana program responsibly. The program began with ten qualifying conditions, a required four-hour training for physicians interested in becoming registered, a limited number of registered organizations (ROs) that could manufacture and dispense medical marijuana, and limits on the types of products available to patients. Over the past two years, in response to critical assessment and feedback from stakeholders, the Department has expanded the medical marijuana program in a variety of ways.

More patients now qualify for medical marijuana through the addition of chronic pain and post-traumatic stress disorder to the list of qualifying conditions (cancer, HIV infection or AIDS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, damage to the nervous tissue of the spinal cord with objective neurological indication of intractable spasticity, epilepsy, inflammatory bowel disease, neuropathies, and Huntington's disease). Nurse practitioners and physician assistants are now eligible to register with the program to certify patients. In addition, a list of registered practitioners who consented to being listed publicly was made available on the State's Medical Marijuana Program website, resulting in the ability for more patients to connect with registered practitioners.

Five additional registered organizations have been authorized to manufacture and dispense medical marijuana in New York State, and we have expanded access by permitting home delivery of medical marijuana. Finally, in December, we adopted new regulations allowing for the sale of additional medical marijuana products, an improved experience for patients and visitors at dispensing facilities and the ability for the Department to approve new courses that will allow prospective practitioners to complete their training in a shorter amount of time. Offering two-hour courses will make it easier for practitioners to certify patients for the program by simplifying the practitioner registration process. The regulations also streamline the manufacturing requirements for medical marijuana products, broaden the capability of registered organizations to advertise, amend security requirements and clarify laboratory testing methods.

I have had the opportunity to speak to patients suffering from many conditions, including chronic pain, who have been helped by medical marijuana. I have also spoken with practitioners who have shared with me the difference this treatment makes in the lives of their patients. I encourage you to visit the [Medical Marijuana Program website](#) to learn more about registering with the program, or visit a dispensing facility near you to see for yourself and speak to a licensed pharmacist.

In November, we shared the new Department Adult/Pediatric Antibiotic Prescribing Guidelines. These pocket references are now available electronically and in hard copy. If you are interested in hard copies, please email marybeth.wenger@health.ny.gov. To review the guidelines, please click [here](#) for an 11 x 17 size pdf and [here](#) for an 8.5 x 11.

I wish you all a happy and healthy new year.

Sincerely,

Howard A. Zucker, M.D., J.D.