

Times Colonist (Victoria)

Retired nurses join flu fight; Others pulled from administrative duties to help in vaccination effort

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Illustrations: Photo: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist / Laurie O'Neill, one of dozens of retired nurses who've been called out to help in the mass-inoculation campaign for H1N1: "After giving the first two shots, I was back in the saddle."

It took just two shots for retired nurse Laurie O'Neill to feel comfortable working on the front lines of H1N1 mass-immunization clinics.

At the end of the first day, O'Neill was ready to start giving the vaccine to kids, always considered trickier than adults, since they need to be calmed and prepared more carefully.

"It was just like riding a bike," said the 62-year-old former public-health nurse, who was working at the clinic set up at the University of Victoria.

"After giving the first two shots, I was back in the saddle."

O'Neill is one of many retired nurses who answered a call for help with the largest public vaccination campaign in provincial history.

The Vancouver Island Health Authority sent out 400 letters last summer seeking recently retired nurses, those with a still-active licence, or those willing to re-activate a licence to take on some short-term paid work. About 65 responded.

The health authority expects about 3,000 shifts will be required to administer the H1N1 vaccine during the campaign.

Along with those delivering the vaccine, volunteers are on hand screening patients, monitoring queues, giving directions and just helping out.

O'Neill, who has been retired for 14 months, said after a day or two at the mass clinic, she realized how much she'd missed daily contact with other people since she retired. The sense of urgency and working for a common purpose has also been rewarding.

"Everybody here has just been working as a team," said O'Neill. "It's been amazing -- there are no egos involved."

Lesley Moss, the health authority's executive director for quality, research and patient safety and central commander for emergency operations and H1N1, said nurses who perform administrative or other non-clinic duties have also been called upon to help out in the pandemic response. She herself will be taking a shift in the coming days.

"Everyone has just been great, saying, 'Yup, I'm there to help,'" she said.

Using non-clinical staff for the work has helped the health authority keep its clinical staff working in hospitals and other medical settings.

"We have responded very well, and our staff are heroes every day," said Moss.

Debra McPherson, president of the B.C. Nurses Union, said she isn't surprised to hear nurses have come through for the pandemic response.

"I'm biased here but I have to say nurses are probably some of the best citizens in Canada," said McPherson.

"Nurses are always willing to contribute.

"It's just part of the life."

In other H1N1 news:

- Health officials say a two-month-old baby who died yesterday in London, Ont., likely had the H1N1 flu. It's believed to be the first death of an infant possibly related to swine flu in the province. The infant was admitted to hospital on Monday suffering from influenza A. H1N1 is considered to be the only influenza A strain circulating in the community, health officials said.

- Canwest Global Communications Corp. announced yesterday it plans to feature on its newspaper websites articles developed by staff from Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children on how to keep children healthy during the flu season. Researchers in California have found the H1N1 virus disproportionately targets the young, and hits them far more severely. The new website is viewable at www.canada.com/sickkids.

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