



A syringe in the hand is worth two birds in the bush

During the past few months we have been bombarded with stories of deficiencies in the responses of government agencies to natural and man-made disasters.

Now we are hearing dire predictions of what would happen if a true flu pandemic should occur—avian-derived or otherwise. A writer in my local paper said we could anticipate hospitals bursting at the seams with patients, profound shortages of health care personnel able to work, and riots at vaccination centers.

People must be getting worried: I have been unable to find a copy of Hitchcock's *The Birds* at my local video store recently.

The scope of these concerns seems so broad as to be beyond anything the individual physician can do to help. But that is not the case. We must remember that the regular epidemic of influenza that strikes each year still kills thousands.

So, ladies and gentlemen, roll up your sleeves.

As Dr. Sherif Mossad points out on page 1041 of this issue, although there are questions about the efficacy of influenza and pneumococcal vaccinations, there are no compelling data that they are unsafe. And the predominant opinion is that they ameliorate the infection rate and attenuate the severity of infection if it occurs. Yet the influenza vaccination rate among health care workers nationwide is less than 40%!

What can we, as individual physicians do? We can be sure that everyone in our office staff gets vaccinated. We can post vaccination reminders all over our waiting areas. We can print, distribute, and post in our offices the locations of local vaccination centers, even if our own offices have a limited supply of vaccine. A website from the American Lung Association is particularly useful: www.findaflushot.com/lungusa. We can offer the vaccine to those accompanying our elderly patients to their visits (even if they are not our regular patients). Many of us have parents in nursing homes and assisted living facilities; we can make sure that these institutions have vaccination programs. We can be compulsive about washing our hands between patients and exercising cough precautions.

If the birds really do come, as in Bodega Bay, things may get very, very ugly. But short of a true pandemic, there is much we can do to make the 2005–2006 flu season a kinder, gentler one.

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