

**Questions for the Record
Chairman, Michael Bilirakis
Ranking Member Ted Strickland
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**

December 15, 2005

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Flu Vaccination Program and Preparations
for a Possible Flu Pandemic**

Question 1: In Dr. Dayton's oral testimony he indicated the benefit of cost savings by investing in a comprehensive influenza vaccination program that should yield a lower rate of infection or illness in the patient population. He also indicated that vaccinating the VA workforce against influenza has measurable cost savings. If there are any data to support these savings or any associated supportive studies, please identify and summarize that information for the record?

Response: Evidence for the benefit of influenza vaccination in patients. Studies of influenza vaccination of adults have shown an association of vaccination with the following benefits:

- reduction in rates of reported influenza-like illness or laboratory-confirmed influenza by a range of 25 to 90 percent;
- fewer lost workdays due to respiratory illness (32 to 43 percent in vaccinated);
- fewer days of working at reduced efficiency;
- fewer health care provider visits (42 to 44 percent in vaccinated);
- reduction in transmission of influenza like illness to others;
- reduction in hospitalizations for all causes;
- reduction in hospitalizations for influenza and pneumonia by as much as 33 percent;
- reductions in hospitalizations for congestive heart failure;
- reduction in death from any cause by as much as 50 percent; and
- evidence of cost effectiveness or cost savings (\$23 to \$73 of reduced medical care costs and indirect costs (e.g. use of sick leave) among vaccinated persons in several studies).

Some of these studies have been conducted within VA health care settings or by VA researchers; others have been conducted within and outside of the United States
Evidence for benefit of influenza vaccination of employees:

Benefits of vaccination that apply to adults certainly also apply to health care workers, but it is believed that only about 40 percent of U.S. health care workers are vaccinated in any year. Low rates of health care worker vaccination may contribute to high rates of absenteeism and staffing strain, poor work performance and productivity, influenza-like illness among employees, transmission of influenza to patients and other

staff (and subsequent illness and death of patients), and transmission of influenza to family members during the annual influenza season.

VA medical facilities have provided no-cost vaccination for many years and have emphasized health care worker vaccination in annual vaccination programs. The special emphasis for the 2005 – 2006 VA Influenza Vaccine Toolkit is on vaccination of all VA staff who work in VA health care facilities, and for the first time this year, VA is collecting national data on the percentage of all health care staff who receive vaccine.

Question 2: Is the VA Central Office aware of the results of the MRSA program at the Pittsburgh VAMC as described by Dr. Muder, and if so, what has been done to promulgate this program VA-wide?

Response: VA Central Office is both aware and very proud of the work done by Dr. Muder and his colleagues to evaluate strategies to reduce health care associated transmission antibiotic resistant organisms such as MRSA (methacillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus – the name of a common bacterium which is resistant to many common antibiotics and an increasing problem in health care settings). Dr. Muder is currently evaluating the application of his work more broadly beyond just one facility. VA Central Office will review and is looking forward to integrating the lessons learned into a major new national program on surveillance and prevention of health care associated infections.

Question 3: What percentage of VA's enrolled population would be categorized as high risk by CDC flu vaccinations standards/guidelines?

Response: VA estimates that 80 percent of veterans served by the VA health care system are either 65 years of age or older, or have a medical condition placing them in a "risk" category for influenza illness.