

MASSACHUSETTS NURSES ASSOCIATION POSITION STATEMENT ON VACCINE TO COMBAT COVID-19 & NURSES RIGHTS TO INFORMED CONSENT VOLUNTARY NATURE OF ACCEPTANCE OF VACCINE

Introduction

For nurses and other healthcare workers, who will be among the first groups of professionals to have the right to voluntarily consent to receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, hope is tempered by grief, loss and the physical exhaustion that has been the product of months spent battling the COVID-19 virus that is still surging in the United States and around our global society (Neegaard, 2020).

The Massachusetts Nurses Association appreciates and supports the decision to ensure that nurses and other healthcare workers across Massachusetts, are among the first to get the vaccine to combat COVID-19, along with other vulnerable populations. The MNA is encouraging our members to take it, based on their clinical setting and personal health issues. MNA nurses at unionized facilities, which is 70 percent of the state's acute care hospitals, have been and will continue to advocate with management on the process for distribution of the vaccine.

Right to Informed Consent

The MNA welcomes and supports the process of shared-decision making and believes that it is vital to ensure that legally valid informed consent is obtained for all persons who voluntarily seek to be immunized against the COVID-19 virus. All healthcare professionals have the right to be informed by their employer of the specific risks and benefits of vaccine administration. The process of shared decision-making is crucial to ensuring legally valid informed consent is obtained. This process will allow skilled practitioners the ability to engage in conversations with all persons to address questions, concerns, fears of side effects and to challenge misinformation that may be visible in print, television, and social media publications (O'Neill, 2020).

Right to Refusal

None of the COVID-19 vaccines currently in development in the United States use the live virus that causes COVID-19. There are several different types of vaccines in development. However, the goal for each of them is to teach our immune systems how to recognize and fight the virus that causes COVID-19. Sometimes this process can cause symptoms, such as fever. These symptoms are normal and are a sign that the body is building immunity. According to Dr. Anthony Fauci; "We know that we have an efficacious vaccine, we've proven it...It will not be effective if people don't take it."

Mandatory vaccination was suggested in 2019 as a resolution to childhood vaccine hesitancy that existed in the United Kingdom. At that time, the House of Lords and the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) opposed the move, arguing that it would backfire, creating

determined vaccine refusers. Vaccine mandates may be undermined by high levels of exemption as they fail to address underlying fears (O'Neill, 2020). Studies suggest that comparable results may be achieved by strongly recommending vaccines instead. The MNA is pleased to see that all the major hospital systems throughout the Commonwealth have made vaccination voluntary, and we expect, as with the flu vaccine, to see the vast majority of nurses will take the vaccine.

Right to Renewed Focus

Despite the importance that the development, approval, and distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine has on our public health and safety, nurses continue to lead the charge and focus on maintaining the highest standard of COVID care. There continues to be a need for universal access to N95 masks and appropriate PPE for nurses and healthcare workers as well as safe staffing to ensure appropriate patient care. The MNA also recommends increased and regular testing of all staff and patients, and the implementation of other proven COVID care protocols. The MNA continues to demand that healthcare employers to ensure the availability, and transparency of distribution of PPE for all frontline workers who continue to be faced with the insurmountable challenges of caring for persons with COVID-19.

The public can assist in this effort by staying home during the holidays. The availability of vaccine therapy is a crucial weapon to mitigate the loss of life and maximize the health of the general public. However, this weapon must be accompanied by continued vigilance which means wearing masks, practicing social distancing and strict hand-hygiene which will allow us to truly celebrate the end of the acute stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

References:

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