

It's time to get heavy with flu bugs

Whenever people gather, so does the local variant of the winter scourge



RUDMAN'S CITY

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Annual flu vaccination is free for the elderly, expectant mothers and people with some medical conditions.

Picture / APN

When humans are a strange breed. Someone invents the magic of television, and we broadcast an endless stream of banal reality shows.

We discover the miracle of inoculating against killer diseases, and instead of vaccinating ourselves against two weeks of winter misery and possible death, the vast majority of us choose to give the quick prick of a needle a miss — even though the chances of catching influenza are as high as one in five.

At the National Party conference over the weekend, Finance Minister Bill English was agonising about the parlous state of the world economy, and the need to keep New Zealand's economy growing.

As he spoke, there's little doubt a group of infected delegates were guaranteeing that their regional variant of the scourge would be passed around the hall, and then the country.

The cost to the economy of the annual flu epidemic must be huge. There's the lost wages — and production — of the 10 to 20 per cent of people who have to take a week or more off.

More than 400 of us die each year from it — either directly or indirectly — and hospitals are overwhelmed with sufferers.

Yet despite all the victim stories, the near-death experiences and the stern warnings from health professionals, more than 75 per cent of New Zealanders just can't be bothered to help themselves — and others — by getting the jab.

This year, around 960,000 doses of vaccine have been distributed. It does seem a bizarre state of affairs in a supposedly civilised, well-educated community.

My boss provides a free flu jab each year

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and I take it. On utilitarian grounds alone, it makes good sense for both the company and me. The cost of the vaccinations must be cheap compared with that of replacing absent workers and providing sick leave payments.

Nationwide, free vaccinations are available only to those 65 and over, to pregnant women, and to children and adults with serious medical problems.

This year's free offer ends at the end of this month.

But even if you have to pay for a trip to your doctor, it seems a small price to avoid a week or 10 days of misery and lost income.

Safely vaccinated myself, I could just sit back and mutter, "serves you right" when I hear of another victim hitting their bed. But it isn't quite that simple.

The experts cover themselves by claiming the vaccine is only 80 per cent effective. Which means there is a small chance I could still succumb. A risk which is increased, I

guess, by the number of times I encounter a thoughtless "Typhoid Mary" who hasn't bothered getting a jab themselves.

As National Influenza Specialist Group spokesman Dr Lance Jennings has highlighted, the estimated annual death toll of 400 is greater than last year's road toll of 280.

The various government campaigns to try to reduce the road toll are ongoing, with laws against speeding, and driving with excess drink and drug levels in your bloodstream. And while criminalising carriers for wandering around with flu bugs in their system might be pushing things too far, I'm all for a more aggressive public health campaign on this ubiquitous disease.

First I'd make the vaccine free for all. If ever there was a universal scourge that attacked young and old, rich and poor, it's the flu. And the more universal the vaccination, the harder it is for the bug to get itself about and infect the uninjected, or the unlucky 20 per cent of the vaccinated.

I'd also get nurses into the schools, the offices and factories and the shopping malls. Make it easy for everyone.

So it might cost a bit. But having up to a fifth of the workforce off work for a week or more each year costs a lot more.

To say nothing of having 400 avoidable deaths.