

# Feeling the flu-shot frenzy

An RN reflects on working during the height of the H1N1 vaccination campaign. BY JILL SCARROW



Patrick Hannigan, 9, receives his H1N1 flu shot from RN Diane Nannarone while his family look on at a special clinic held at the East York Civic Centre.

For seven weeks last year, Toronto public health nurse Carol Lee spent her days inside a meeting room at the East York Civic Centre, where nurses armed with vaccine vials and syringes sat at 10 tables set up around the room. Shrieks of young children who'd just received a poke from the nurse's needle pierced the air, rising above the hum of voices emanating from the crowd in the hall. Outside, lineups of adults, pregnant women and families – armed with toys, snacks and books for small children bundled up in coats and strapped into strollers – stretched and twisted through the parking lot.

Lee was one of hundreds of nurses in Ontario who inoculated thousands of people against the H1N1 virus in late 2009. Usually, she works in Toronto Public Health's reproductive and infant health section. But she volunteered to leave that post and work in the clinics because, even after 26 years in the profession, she was eager to try new things. She quickly realized the H1N1 campaign was going to be different than anything she had worked on before. She was re-assigned to the civic centre in

October, a week early, after more than 100 people lined up to get a shot before the first clinic had even opened its doors.

Everywhere people went for the shot, RNs worked tirelessly to answer questions about the virus or the vaccine's adjuvant, and provide them with a pinprick to protect them from the disease. In Toronto, thousands of people lined up for hours at clinics across the city. At the East York Civic Centre, some parents arrived as early as 4:30 a.m. one morning in October to stake out their places in the queue for clinics that opened at noon. But Lee says people didn't complain about the long wait. Most asked how the nurses were faring, and many were just relieved to finally be able to protect themselves – and their children – against the disease.

"By the time they got inside, they were just so happy, they didn't complain at all," she says. "Some people compared it to lining up for rock concerts when they were younger."

During the busiest shifts, Lee says 2,000 people would get a shot. Even on a slow day, hundreds of Torontonians rolled up their sleeves. Some days, Lee was the clinic coordi-

nator responsible for making sure the nurses giving the shots had the information they needed to answer questions. Other days, she put needles into arms. Lee says the work gave her an adrenalin rush that carried her through the 10-hour shifts she sometimes logged seven days a week.

"The energy was frenetic," she says. "At the end of the day, when we saw the number of people we'd vaccinated, we really felt we'd accomplished something."

But the work could be wearing too, especially when she had to refuse to immunize people. Lee met one girl who couldn't be vaccinated because of an egg allergy, but her mother was adamant that she receive the shot. The woman began to cry when Lee told her that her daughter couldn't be vaccinated. Lee says the reaction wasn't surprising, especially after the news in October that children had died from H1N1.

"When people think their physical survival or the survival of their progeny is threatened, anxiety and fear set in," she says.

Of course, some were more willing patients than others. Small children could be particularly skeptical that a needle could actually be good for them. Lee remembers one four-year-old girl in particular who, after getting the vaccine, calmly told Lee it wasn't nice to hurt people and marched out of the room without waiting for her parents, who she felt had been accomplices to this plan.

Besides helping people stay healthy, Lee says one of the best rewards was watching everyone come together as a team. Nurses, Lee says, were either loading the vaccine, giving out the needles, screening people to make sure they fit into the priority groups, or watching people after they got the shot for any adverse reactions. Lee says she admired the way her colleagues tackled every new task.

"This was one of the best experiences of my career," she says. **RN**

---

JILL SCARROW IS ACTING MANAGING EDITOR AT RNAO.