Flu Vaccination Coverage in 2020 in the Baixo Vouga Health Centre Group in Portugal

A Taxa de Cobertura Vacinal Contra a Gripe em 2020 no Agrupamento de Centros de Saúde do Baixo Vouga em Portugal

Keywords: Influenza Vaccines; Portugal; Vaccination Coverage
Palavras-chave: Cobertura Vacinal; Portugal; Vacinas Contra a Gripe

Dear Editor,

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the success of the 2020/2021 flu vaccination campaign was crucial not only to reduce the burden of flu in the national healthcare system but also to preserve healthcare resources that may be needed for the care of COVID-19 patients.[1]

This cross-sectional study describes the variation of flu vaccine coverage of patients with diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or chronic heart disease, or age over 65 years between 2018 and 2020. Flu vaccine coverage was assessed through the prescribing of influenza vaccine or its administration in the previous 12 months. Data was collected on the 3rd January 2021 from the public database *'Bilhete de Identidade dos Cuidados de Saúde Primários'* concerning the 25 family health units (FHU) of the Baixo Vouga Health Centre Group, in Portugal (three FHU excluded due to missing data). The current study did not require ethical approval because it involved only aggregated data that is freely available in the public domain. No individual-level data was accessed by the authors.

In terms of the rate of influenza vaccination coverage on the 22 FHU studied, 17 FHU had an increase in coverage during the previous year (Table 1). Compared to the coverage in 2019, the percentage increase in 2020 ranged from 1.7% to 35.8%. In half of the FHU, this increase was much higher in 2019 - 2020 compared to 2018 - 2019. Five FHU had a decrease in the rate of vaccination coverage. The mean vaccination coverage has constantly been increasing in the last three years, although it is still below national coverage.[2]

An interesting observation was that in 64.7% of the FHU which saw an increase in their flu vaccination coverage in 2020, the percentage increase was even higher from 2019 to 2020 compared to the previous influenza season, despite the known shortage of vaccines in 2020. The observed in-

Table 1 – Flu vaccination coverage of patients with diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, chronic heart disease or age over 65 years, with the influenza vaccine prescribed or administered in the last 12 months in the FHUs (n = 22)

Family Health Unit	No. patients 65+ years	Flu vaccination coverage (year-month)			% increase or decrease	
		2018-11	2019-11	2020-11	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020
1	2319	46.7	49.6	52.4	6.0	5.8
2	2403	35.0	41.7	51.6	18.9	23.8
3	1971	42.6	54.0	52.8	26.8	-2.3
4	1569	49.8	47.6	44.3	-4.5	-6.9
5	2891	42.1	43.4	56.5	3.0	30.1
6	4018	43.3	45.8	54.9	5.6	19.9
7	1510	39.6	53.3	44.2	34.7	-17.0
8	2089	36.5	35.2	47.8	-3.6	35.8
9	2663	35.4	38.2	48.3	7.9	26.5
10	3082	41.6	48.0	50.0	15.5	4.2
11	2568	36.9	40.7	49.3	10.4	21.1
12	2719	32.9	39.1	50.2	18.9	28.1
13	2419	42.0	48.0	50.9	14.2	6.1
14	2163	40.0	43.6	46.6	8.8	7.0
15	2219	43.7	48.1	49.2	10.0	2.3
16	2034	44.0	41.2	48.8	-6.4	18.4
17	2334	39.0	43.4	42.4	11.3	-2.3
18	1300	38.0	39.7	45.4	4.6	14.3
19	2254	41.1	46.3	56.0	12.6	21.1
20	2217	38.0	37.8	47.2	-0.3	24.7
21	1630	49.2	49.4	46.1	0.4	-6.6
22	2482	43.0	45.1	45.8	4.8	1.7
Mean		40.9	44.5	49.1	-	-

crease could be attributed to: i) the COVID-19 pandemic, with both patients and physicians perhaps giving more importance to contagious respiratory diseases that were previously believed to be somewhat trivial (including the flu),[3] and decided to be vaccinated or advise flu vaccination; ii) the awareness of the general public regarding the importance of the development a COVID-19 vaccine, promoted by the media and information campaigns, may have shattered some myths related to the adverse effects of vaccination and consequently increased confidence in vaccine safety. Both stated reasons were previously known factors for the non-uptake of the influenza vaccine.[3,4] Future studies should analyze the factors associated with the apparent increased uptake of the influenza vaccine during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand if those factors can be explored in future vaccination campaigns, including the one against SARS-CoV-2.

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Recebido: 03 de janeiro de 2021 - **Aceite:** 23 de fevereiro de 2021 - ***Online issue published*:** 03 de maio de 2021

https://doi.org/10.20344/amp.15649