

Meningitis shot mandatory for campus residents

By: Kaeli Conforti

Over the Thanksgiving holiday break, University of South Florida students received letters and e-mails regarding a change in the University's vaccination policy.

As of January 2008, it will be mandatory for all students living on any USF campus to be immunized against meningococcal (bacterial) meningitis.

Students living in Residence Hall One last fall were required to show documentation of their vaccination before returning at the start of this semester. All new contracts for the spring and those starting for fall 2008 must also include proof of vaccination.

This requirement is mandatory for all students living in the residence hall regardless of any personal or religious reasons concerning vaccinations.

"I applaud Dr. Genshaft for her decision, and I know it will have positive results for the USF community," said Brian Akins, the residence hall's residential life coordinator. "This is a positive thing for our campus."

"We want to make sure everyone gets one," said Kay-Lynne Taylor, the director of residential life and housing. "This is such a great process to be able to implement, and I can't imagine why it wouldn't be a good thing."

USF St. Petersburg Campus hosted an immunization clinic on Jan 17 in an effort to help students complete this new requirement.

Students were required to bring their vaccination records to the clinic, along with a signed notice of parental consent for anyone younger than 17. The bacterial meningitis vaccine was free for students under age 18 but everyone over the age of 19 was charged \$105 for the shot.

The clinic was set up by the Pinellas County Health Department. Students can obtain the vaccination from their office located at 205 Dr. Martin Luther King St N in St. Petersburg, as well as any centers throughout Pinellas County.

Another resource for students seeking the shot is the office of Dr. Wong, located at 461 7th Ave. S in St. Petersburg. Wong administers the shot for \$100 to anyone older than 19 and charges a \$20 administration fee for students under 18.

Students who visit Student Health Services at the USF Tampa campus can receive the vaccination for \$90 through the Hillsborough County Health Department.

Amy Blanton, a student who currently lives in Residence Hall One, planned on getting her shot over the semester break. "I understand their methods. It makes sense why they're doing it because of what happened over in Tampa," she said, referring to the death of

USF sophomore Rachel Futterman in September of 2007. It was Futterman's death that motivated the policy changes.

"We don't always see these things or feel as vulnerable until it happens so close to us," said Dr. Susan Phillips, director of the center for counseling, health and wellness at the St. Petersburg campus.

Lauren Burg, a student who has lived in Residence Hall One since it opened last year, said it would help her to feel better knowing everyone had been vaccinated. "My mother told me 'you're getting it done anyway.'"

Journalism major Jeff Macolino spoke positively about the vaccination.

"I would rather get the shot whether it was required or not," Macolino said, although he does not live in the residence hall. "It's better to be safe than sorry."

"It's a no-brainer," said Sorcha Sills, an English literature major who has lived in the residence hall since last fall. "I've already got the meningitis shot, and I think it's a good idea that people living in a place where germs travel at the speed of light protect themselves from nasty contagious diseases."

Some students do not see what all the fuss is about.

"It's expensive," Sarah Pruitt said. "A lot of college students don't have the extra money." Pruitt, a criminology student who does not live in the residence hall, compared the cost of the shot to being almost equal to the cost of two textbooks for a class.

"There are other ways to protect yourself, like not sharing drinks," she added.

Meningitis is an infection of the fluids that surround the brain and spinal cord, and is caused by a form of bacteria. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 100 to 125 cases occur on college campuses each year in the United States resulting in five-to-15 deaths despite intense antibiotic treatment.

Those who survive often lose their arms or legs due to the blood infections caused during the later stages of the disease. Another 11-to-19 percent suffer hearing loss, have problems with their nervous systems, and even experience seizures strokes or brain damage.

The American College Health Association reports that the disease can be spread by droplets of respiratory secretions in the air and by direct contact with anyone who is infected. Students are encouraged to protect themselves by not sharing drinks, cigarettes, lipsticks, and not participating in intimate contact, such as kissing, with an infected person.

Last September, the State University System's Board of Governors met to discuss whether all students attending Florida universities should provide proof of vaccination. Board members decided instead that incoming students would have the option to sign a waiver saying they knew the risks of not receiving the shot.

The issue will be further discussed during the Board's next meeting on January 23rd.

"There's no reason for those deaths to happen," Phillips said. "With a vaccine it doesn't have to happen."