

EDITORIAL

All-out effort needed on flu

Two obstacles to truly effective vaccine

This flu season is a rough one. But you knew that. New York's health department reported 2,221 new hospitalizations and 11,683 lab-confirmed cases for the week ending Jan. 27. Those are the highest weekly numbers statewide since reporting began in 2004. Nationally, it could be the worst season since 2014-15, when 34 million Americans got the flu and about 56,000 died.

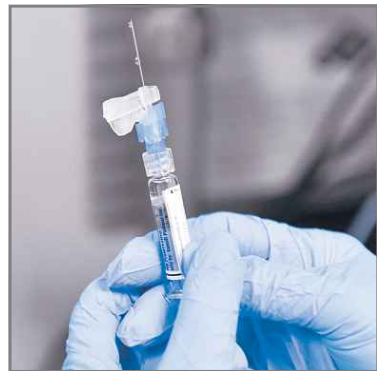
That's bad, but not apocalyptic. Apocalyptic would be something like the influenza pandemic 100 years ago in which more than 50 million people died worldwide.

While that sounds like something that could happen only in the bad old days, epidemiologists warn that a lethal virus like the one that exploded in 1918 could recur, with airplane travel and modern population density enabling its spread. A century later, a dangerous flu strain could kill 200 million to 400 million people worldwide.

It's well past time for an effective flu vaccine.

The lack of one has to do with two reasons — the difficulty of targeting an ever-evolving set of viruses, and the structure of profit-based pharmacology.

Traditional vaccines like those for measles, mumps and rubella, or yellow fever work very well. They are over 97 percent effective. The worst thing about them for pharmaceutical manufacturers is that they work well for many, many years. There isn't much profit in a drug people take once or twice. As a result, there's little commercial incentive to invent a flu vaccine that works well against every possible strain of the disease.



DAVID HANDSCHUH

A vaccine injection is prepared at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan.

A different way of funding the hunt is needed and it won't be easy because right now, the drug companies are quite happy making \$3 billion a year on annual flu vaccines that usually aren't that effective, as anyone who had the shot and still got ill can attest. Twice in the past two weeks, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has urged New Yorkers to get flu vaccinations, and while it would tamp down the spread if everyone did, it's a tough sell at an estimated 17 percent rate of effectiveness.

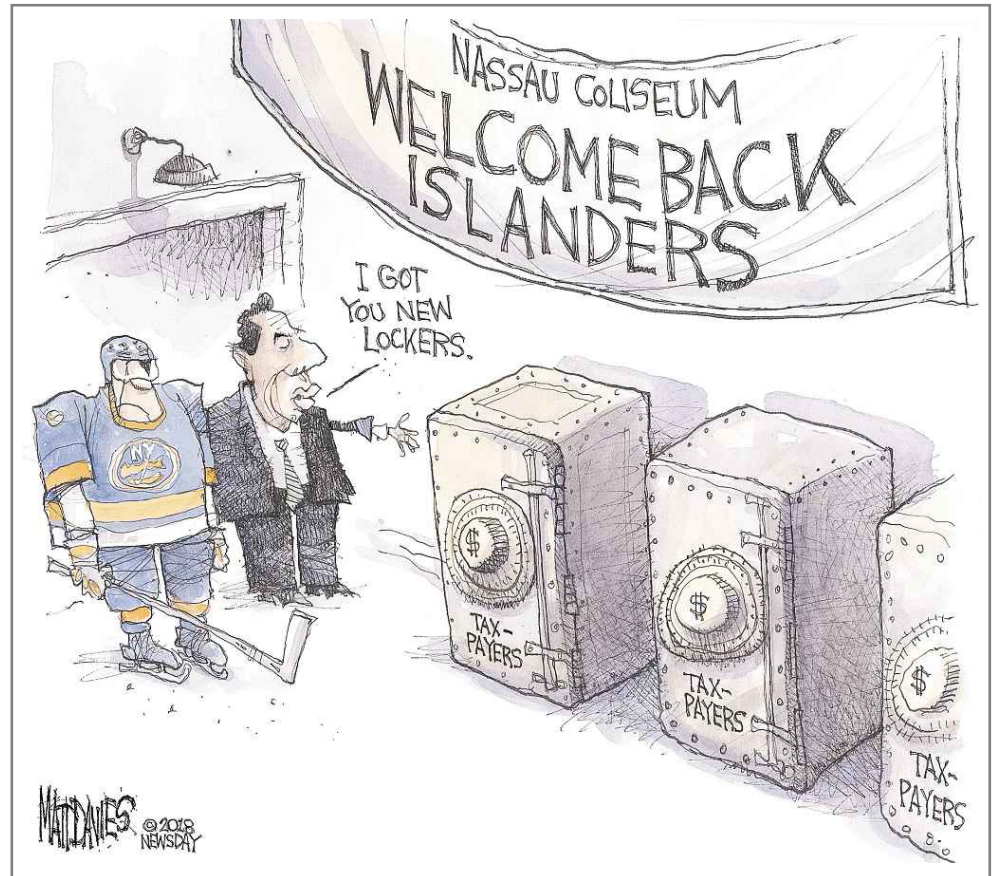
While flu viruses mutate, there are common traits all of them share. A long-lasting "universal flu vaccine" that provides immunity against against the core of all strains, including those that humans could catch from animals, is what's needed. While the common traits are the hardest traits to target, scientists believe a universal vaccine is possible, and slow progress is being made by several academic teams.

An all-hands-on-deck "Manhattan Project" response with investments and organizational help from world governments and philanthropies, and financial rewards for developing the vaccine, is the best way to reach the goal. For now, however, there is little alternative to vaccination, frequent hand-washing and discreet sneezes. Stay home from work or school when you're sick, get tested and take antiviral medications when diagnosed with the flu.

These are largely ineffective solutions to a potentially catastrophic problem. And if we wait for the next pandemic, or depend entirely on the profit motivations of the pharmaceutical industry for protection, the carnage could be unlike anything we've seen for a century.

— The editorial board

MATT DAVIES



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LETTERS

Drawbacks of gov's tax proposal

The proposal by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to convert the state income tax to a payroll tax would not help retirees or residents who depend on investments to supplement their income ["Bill to protect taxpayers OKd," News, Jan. 24].

It might be possible to impose a payroll tax within New York, but the federal government and adjacent states and municipalities that employ New York residents would seem unlikely to participate. Residents of some other states who commute to New York also would not be helped.

Anyone fortunate enough to have a private-sector pension or tax-deferred retirement savings also would not be helped.

Others have pointed out that Social Security, pensions

and employer supplements to retirement plans are based on income. If employee pay were reduced by the amount of the payroll tax, employees would have less retirement income.

Stanley G. Kalemari,
Melville

Set qualifications for school boards

The situation in the Hempstead school district is disturbing and tragic ["Hempstead case given more time," News, Jan. 24].

The school board hired Shimon Waronker, a successful and proven educator, to clean up the mess that existed for many years under previous administrations.

Recently, a new board majority put Waronker on administrative leave, firing the experienced professionals he hired to improve the failing district, while attempting to place the blame for the lack of progress

on Waronker.

Problems such as these can occur because of the makeup of local school boards. Surprisingly, the only requirements to run for a seat are that a candidate be at least 18 and a resident of the community. Board members are entrusted with the education and safety of our children, plus the handling of hundreds of millions of dollars of residents' tax money.

More stringent eligibility requirements should be put in place. I suggest candidates must have attended some college and have shown up for at least 40 percent of board meetings in the prior two years. I agree with the recommendation by state education officials that the board members be required to take an orientation course given by the state Education Department.

Gus Costa,
Westbury

Editor's note: The writer