



## Department of Health

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Commissioner

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Executive Deputy Commissioner

December 2015

Dear Colleague:

Greetings, and welcome to my second letter to New York State's physicians. I'd like to devote this month's letter to three issues that are relevant to public health: 1) flu season; 2) synthetic cannabinoids and 3) a brief update on the State's Medical Marijuana program and the online course to become a registered physician in the program.

**Flu season:** It's impossible to predict the severity and timing of any flu season. Every year, however, flu causes widespread illness. Last year's flu sickened approximately 51,000 people in New York, causing more than 11,000 hospitalizations and six pediatric deaths. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends an annual vaccine for everyone over six months of age. According to the CDC, less than 49 percent of all New Yorkers were vaccinated in 2014. We urge all New Yorkers to get a flu vaccine. One study showed that flu vaccination reduced flu-related hospitalizations among adults of all ages by 71 percent.

It's especially important for people in the health care professions to take precautions against the flu. To address this concern, New York State implemented the flu mask mandate in 2013. The regulation requires certain regulated facilities to activate policies and procedures once I, as the State health commissioner, declare that the flu is prevalent in the state. These policies and procedures must ensure that personnel who do not receive a flu vaccine wear a surgical or procedure mask in areas where patients or residents are typically present. Last year, 86 percent of the state's health care workforce in facilities covered by the regulation were vaccinated. With your help, we hope to achieve higher vaccination rates across New York this year.

**Synthetic cannabinoids:** The surging popularity of these man-made drugs has created a serious and sustained public health problem in New York State. Synthetic cannabinoids encompass a wide variety of chemicals that stimulate the same receptor in the body as cannabinoid 9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana. However, synthetic cannabinoids are not marijuana. The exact effects of these drugs are wildly unpredictable. Side effects include, but are not limited to: confusion, seizures, tachycardia, paranoia, agitation, nausea and vomiting, irrational behavior, hallucinations, violent behavior, acute renal failure and death. Synthetic cannabinoids are applied to plant materials, then packaged as incense, herbal mixtures or potpourri and sold in gas stations, convenience stores and head shops, as well as by drug dealers on the street. The slick packaging bears falsely reassuring disclaimers, and is designed to appeal to young people.

Between April 1<sup>st</sup> and September 3<sup>rd</sup> of this year, New York had more than 4,700 emergency department visits and 1,100 poison control center calls associated with synthetic cannabinoids. This represents a more than an eightfold increase during the same period in

2014. Last summer, Governor Andrew Cuomo called on the Department of Health to pass emergency regulations to expand the list of banned substances. This follows a 2012 ban on the sale and possession of dozens of synthetic cannabinoids, as well as “bath salts”. By expanding the list, New York is cracking down on the illicit manufacturing and sales of new substances that bypassed previous regulations and attempting to curb the popularity of these drugs, especially among youth and those with histories of substance abuse or mental illness, who are most vulnerable. Be on the lookout for the use of these drugs by your patients. We need to work together to stop this scourge.

If you have patients with medical conditions that may benefit from the use of medical marijuana, I would also like to remind you that next month is the launch of New York’s Medical Marijuana Program. I encourage you to enroll in the online course to become a registered physician, so you can certify eligible patients to receive medical marijuana. For more information, please access at:

[https://www.health.ny.gov/regulations/medical\\_marijuana/practitioner/](https://www.health.ny.gov/regulations/medical_marijuana/practitioner/).

Until next month, have a healthy and happy holiday season. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Howard A. Zucker, M.D., J.D.  
Commissioner of Health