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H1N1 flu vaccine fears fueled over airwaves

By: Sonny Bunch

Interviewing former Senate majority leader and famed surgeon Bill Frist recently for his HBO talk show, "Real Time With Bill Maher," the host declared, "I would never get a swine flu vaccine or any vaccine."

Mr. Maher, recently honored with the Richard Dawkins Award as the figure in the arts and media who, among other things, best "advocates increased scientific knowledge," refused to be swayed by Dr. Frist's assurances — reflecting the professional medical consensus — that the vaccine is safe and effective.

Mr. Maher is not alone. Over the past few weeks, several prominent talk-show hosts from across the political spectrum have stoked public anxiety about the swine flu vaccine.

Rush Limbaugh was defiant on his Oct. 7 show, demanding, "How are they going to make me take it if I refuse to take it?"

Glenn Beck was slightly more circumspect, saying on his Sept. 30 program that "you don't know if this is gonna cause neurological damage."

Similar fears about the vaccine have led the Department of Health and Human Services to create a Web site countering myths and rumors about the swine flu virus with facts.

"I think the one thing that is worrisome is that those who are critical of vaccination often do not base their opinions on sound scientific information," says Tom Skinner, the senior public affairs officer at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "At the end of the day, we simply want people to base their decisions on credible information. The best antidote for fear is information."

Dr. Sanjay Gupta, a neurosurgeon and CNN medical reporter, agrees.

"There are two things that are sort of at play here in terms of people's resistance regarding the vaccine," he said. "One is the concern that they haven't done enough safety studies and two that [this flu] isn't a big deal."

Dr. Gupta, author of the new book "Cheating Death" and host of its companion documentary, "Another Day: Cheating Death," says he seeks to acknowledge legitimate concerns without fueling unfounded fears.

Though Dr. Gupta declined to speculate about the motivations of other media professionals who have struck out against the vaccine, he said he accepts "a responsibility as a medical doctor who's also a reporter to report the best science that I can find and make a case at the end of it for all people."

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Mr. Maher couched his criticism of the vaccine in terms of a broader right-left alliance suspicious of government meddling in health care.

"On this question, I think I would probably be more with conservatives," Mr. Maher avowed to Dr. Frist. "Conservatives always say ... 'They're going to screw everything up. So why would you let them be the ones to stick a disease into your arm?'"

Tevi Troy, deputy secretary of health and human services in the Bush administration and visiting senior fellow at the conservative Hudson Institute, took issue with this characterization.

"I would say, perhaps, you can't trust the government for the administration of health care, and that's why I'm concerned about the public option," said Mr. Troy, "but that doesn't mean that there aren't very good scientists at the CDC, at the [Food and Drug Administration], at the [National Institutes of Health] who help us develop cures and who help us plan our public health care responses to bioevents."

Mr. Troy worries about the sphere of public health devolving into a partisan battleground. "It seems like there's Republican information and Democratic information, and I think that's what leads to some of these controversies" over health care, he says. "There's a sense that it's not some career official at a public health service telling you this, but it's the Obama administration telling you this."

Mr. Limbaugh's response to calls from Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to get vaccinated illustrate Mr. Troy's concerns about partisanship coloring public health discussions.

Calling out the secretary by name, the conservative broadcasting icon thundered over the airwaves: "I am not going to take it, precisely because you're now telling me I must. It's not your role, it's not your responsibility, and you do not have that power. I don't want to take your vaccine."

What's needed, Mr. Troy argues, is a bracketing off of technical medical questions relating to public health from more debatable policy differences. He'd like to see, he says, public officials assume a "kind of responsibility to declare these areas a no-fighting or neutrality zone, say we're not going to fight partisan politics about swine flu, that we're going to say this is the right thing to do and press forward from there."