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Thousands of H1N1 vaccines remain in MV

Last fall's potentially deadly H1N1 flu ended up having more in common with the seasonal, 24-hour version of the virus: It was here, and then it was gone.

The result is thousands of surplus vaccines in the Magic Valley and millions in the United States. The South Central Public Health District alone has 13,680 spare doses, with 930 set to expire by the end of June and the rest losing their potency in 2011, Director Rene LeBlanc said. That's down from about 29,000 vaccines for H1N1, commonly known as swine flu, that the district received.

"The problem is the public feels the need for it is over," he said Thursday. "It's still good to go out and get it."

Without public interest, the health district and other health clinics that received the vaccines through the federal government will let the vaccines fall below 100-percent potency before disposing of them. Federal regulations prevent them from disposing of the vaccines before their expiration date, LeBlanc said. The government spent \$1.6 billion on the vaccines and the local clinics received them as a grant.

The health district hasn't hosted any H1N1 vaccine clinics since January, LeBlanc said. He estimated that the district was able to vaccinate about 20 percent of south-central Idaho before the population felt the risk had passed.

He attributed part of the resulting surplus to misinformation about a preservative in the vaccine being linked to autism in children. The Federal Drug Administration rejected a link between the preservative and autism in 2004.

Family Health Services also experienced a drop-off in January, said CEO Lynn Hudgens. By January, the nonprofit had given out 5,383 of its 7,300 vaccines. Only a handful have been passed out since then, he said.

"The timing of the whole thing was not that great because (the vaccine) was late in coming, and then when it finally got here some of the emphasis, or least awareness of the patients in needing it, that had worn a little thin," Hudgens said. "If you listen to the CDC and so forth, they still indicate that everyone should get it. So if you haven't already, it is still a good idea."

The H1N1 vaccine will also be available as a combination with the seasonal flu vaccine this fall. That will hand the health district another batch of vaccine, with the current surplus likely still in storage. LeBlanc said the district will offer its current store to people only interested in the H1N1 vaccination or those who prefer the two separate.