

NHS staff in England

Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2NS
Tel: 020 7210 5142
Fax: 020 7210 5409
david.nicholson@dh.gsi.gov.uk

Gateway number: 12415

13 August 2009

Dear Colleague

I am pleased to be sharing some of the specific details of the swine flu vaccination programme following an agreement by Ministers earlier today; but before I do, can I thank you all again for all your work to stand up the National Pandemic Flu Service (NPFs) at the end of July. The successful launch of the service is a credit to all your hard work. I know that many of you are going the extra mile to meet the needs of our patients and I want you to know that this is acknowledged and appreciated.

Vaccination against the swine flu virus has always been a part of our approach to managing a pandemic, and good progress has been made in developing an appropriate vaccine.

We have always said that prioritisation of different groups for vaccination will be based on the best possible scientific advice. Two independent expert scientific committees - the Joint Committee for Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) – have provided this advice.

Having taken this advice, Ministers across the UK have today agreed the priority 'at risk' groups to be offered the first doses of the swine flu vaccination, as well as when the vaccination programme is anticipated to start. Vaccination will only begin when the vaccines have been licensed by the European Medicines Agency (EMA).

I can confirm that once the vaccine has been licensed, the following groups should be prioritised for vaccination in the following order:

1. Individuals aged six months and up to 65 years in the current seasonal flu vaccine clinical at risk groups
2. Pregnant women, subject to licensing conditions on trimesters
3. Household contacts of immunocompromised individuals
4. People aged 65 and over in the current seasonal flu vaccine clinical at risk groups

These groups have been identified because they are at highest risk of severe illness should they contract the swine flu virus.

Frontline health and social care workers across the UK will also be offered the vaccine at the same time as the first clinical risk group, as they are at increased risk of infection and of transmitting that infection to vulnerable patients. Those staff eligible for seasonal flu vaccine, as set out in the Green Book, will be eligible for swine flu vaccination. This includes staff who have regular clinical contact with patients and who are directly involved in patient care. Examples of those groups who will be offered the vaccine include doctors, dentists, midwives and nurses, paramedics and ambulance drivers, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and radiographers. Students and trainees in these disciplines, and volunteers who are working with patients, will also be included.

I would urge all of you who are eligible for early swine flu vaccination to take up the offer at the earliest opportunity – this will protect yourselves, your family and your patients. I want to take this opportunity to remind you that the swine flu vaccination will not protect you against seasonal flu, and recommend that you take up the offer of the seasonal flu vaccine this year too.

The vaccine manufacturers have advised that they expect a license for the vaccine to be granted around the end of September/ beginning of October. Based on these assumptions, the vaccination programme will therefore begin a short time thereafter.

Further operational guidance to the NHS on the roll out of the programme will be made available in the next few weeks. The Department of Health is working with the BMA and NHS organisations to reach a comprehensive swine flu vaccine implementation plan for the first stage of the programme.

Preparations continue to be made to extend the programme beyond these initial priority groups and JCVI will consider this matter further and report back in due course.

Over the coming months you will begin to see a public facing campaign to encourage vaccine uptake among the prioritised groups. At the same time, targeted communications to those people who are normally advised to get a seasonal flu jab will continue to encourage them to make an appointment for their annual vaccination.

For those of you delivering the vaccine, there will be resources available to support the administration, coordination and delivery of the programme. These will be available on the DH website in www.dh.gov.uk/swinefluvaccinationprogramme.

David Nicholson

NHS Chief Executive

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Nicholson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David Nicholson CBE
NHS Chief Executive