

Information Update from Department of Health

Swine Flu – Monday 20 July

Andy Burnham's Oral statement to the House of Commons on National Pandemic Flu Service

With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the A(H1N1) Swine Flu pandemic.

I wish to do three things today: to update the House on the spread of the virus, to provide additional details about the launch of the National Pandemic Flu Service, and to set out how Hon Members will be kept informed during the summer recess.

In recent weeks, we have discovered a great deal more about the Swine Flu virus.

Whilst it has spread quickly, the virus has not become more dangerous. For the vast majority, Swine Flu remains a mild and self-limiting illness. And let me be clear Mr Speaker, our advice to the public about dealing with it has not changed.

However, as cases rise, it's understandable that people are becoming more concerned – and we must continue to provide reassuring, consistent and clear advice.

Let me be clear, our advice has not changed. For pregnant women, the CMO will be re-issuing existing advice later today. I give a summary, but Hon Members may wish to refer to the full advice. The CMO says that most pregnant women with swine flu will only get mild symptoms, but pregnancy brings a higher risk of complications. Bearing these risks in mind, at present mothers-to-be are advised to continue normal activities such as going to work, travelling on public transport, attending events and family gatherings. But they are advised to take the following steps to reduce their risk of infection and complications:

first to observe good hand hygiene (frequent use of soap and water or sanitizer);

second, wherever possible, avoid contact with someone who is known or suspected to have swine 'flu;

third, if they have 'flu-like symptoms, to make early contact with your General Practitioner who may advise treatment with antiviral drugs.

If in doubt, pregnant women should seek advice, and if they think they have symptoms they need to contact their GP as soon as possible for antiviral treatment. The CMO will be reissuing this advice later today.

Advice to parents

I also understand that families with small children have concerns. The key characteristic of Swine Flu is fever. The first thing parents should do is check if their child has a temperature over 38 degree celsius.

They should then contact the National Pandemic Flu Service once it has launched, or their GP, if their child has a high temperature and any one of the following symptoms: tiredness, headache, sore throat, shortness of breath, loss of appetite, vomiting and diarrhoea, aching muscles, or limb and joint pain.

Latest HPA figures

Mr Speaker, since my last statement to the House, the daily reported figures from the

Health Protection Agency have been replaced by weekly estimates, based on the numbers reporting flu-like illnesses to their GPs.

The latest figures published on Thursday showed how cases have grown, with 55,000 new cases of Swine Flu reported last week alone. There were 652 people in hospital, 53 of whom were in critical care. There had been 26 deaths in England.

The figures also confirm that the virus has now taken hold around the country, rather than in isolated pockets – and show how quickly this has happened.

On 8 July, just six Primary Care Trusts reported exceptional levels of flu-like illness. By 15 July this increased to 110 PCTs. Hence our immediate decision last week to activate the National Pandemic Flu Service.

And the latest figures show nine out of ten NHS regions are now showing exceptional levels of flu-like illness, based on GP consultations.

And Mr Speaker, GPs are on the front line in this pandemic. They're coping admirably with the increased workload, and I'm sure the whole House would want to extend its thanks to them, their staff and to everybody working so hard throughout the health service, the Health Protection Agency and the Department of Health. All professionals deserve our full support – and the best way to do this is to find new ways to relieve pressure on the front line.

The technology to launch the National Pandemic Flu Service has been available for some time, but with these latest HPA figures – and drawing on advice from the field – we have now reached a point where the Service is required. I can confirm therefore that the Service will go live in England by the end of this week, subject to testing. It will be accompanied by a major public information campaign.

After the launch, people will no longer need to ring their GP. They can either answer questions online via the new website, or ring the call centre service, where trained staff will be able to assess them over the phone.

If Swine Flu is confirmed, they will then get an authorisation number, which their flu friend can use to pick up antivirals from the local antiviral collection point.

I will ensure that all Members will receive information on the location and number of collection points in their area before the launch of the Service later this week.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the situation is different. We haven't seen the same rate of spread, and as a result, the service will not be in operation in those countries this week, but they may choose to opt in at a later date.

People in these regions should therefore continue checking their symptoms on the NHS website, or via the Swine Flu Information Line and then calling their GP for diagnosis over the phone.

Planning assumptions

Mr Speaker, the Government must be as open as possible about the potential scale of the threat, so that organisations across both public and private sectors can plan effectively.

Last week's Planning Assumptions set out reasonable 'worst case scenarios' for them to plan against.

We published a range of figures covering the numbers who could get Swine Flu; who could experience complications; and who could be hospitalised or die.

The Assumptions also cover the number who could be absent from work because they or

their family gets Swine Flu.

Let me stress again that these are worst case scenarios, not predictions – and we need the media to play its part in reporting them as such.

For the NHS, the assumptions mean they can now step up their preparations to cope with a sudden surge in Swine Flu cases, and they already have detailed plans in place.

Similarly infrastructure providers and other essential operators, like food suppliers and electricity, gas and water companies, already have continuity plans to maintain services.

But organisations of all kinds should now be establishing plans to reduce the threat Swine Flu poses to the economy.

The Government has published various guidance documents on continuity planning, and we've also set up a new Business Advisory Network for Flu to provide a single source of information and advice. Full details are available on the Business link website – www.businesslink.gov.uk.

Vaccines

Mr Speaker, let me now update the House on vaccines.

The Department of Health has already signed two contracts with manufacturers to supply enough vaccine for the whole population. According to their delivery schedules, we should begin receiving supplies from August, with enough becoming available for at least 30 million people by the end of the year.

Clearly we want the vaccine available as soon as possible, but we cannot compromise on safety. We will take all necessary steps to ensure the vaccine is appropriately tested.

We are also now planning the vaccination programme so that we can start administering vaccines to priority groups, including NHS and social care staff, as soon as we get the green light to proceed. And we will continue to take the best independent scientific advice on all questions around vaccination.

Information for MPs

Finally, Mr Speaker, I recognise that Hon. Members must be updated during the Parliamentary recess.

I have therefore asked Strategic Health Authorities to provide weekly briefings for MPs coinciding with the HPA's national updates. This will cover local information on the number of diagnosed and confirmed cases, hospitalisations, as well as updates on antiviral collection points and local information on any clusters or other specific developments, and a hotline number for Hon Members to use to contact their local Strategic Health Authority.

In addition, the Civil Contingencies Committee will meet weekly, and Ministers and officials will be in close contact throughout the summer months to respond to emerging issues. And this evening, there will be a briefing session open to all members with the CMO.

I'm also grateful for the constructive conversations I've had with the Hon. Members for Cambridgeshire South [Lansley] and North Norfolk [Lamb]. I will of course keep both front benches updated over the summer, and we'll continue regular discussions with Health Ministers in the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure a consistent UK-wide response. Mr Speaker, in conclusion, concern has risen and there is increasing pressure on services. But there is no change to the advice or Government plans.

It is because we have planned carefully for this eventuality that we have large quantities of

antivirals, a National Pandemic Flu Service about to launch, and a vaccine on the way. This constitutes a solid base upon which to deal with future challenges. I commend this statement to the House.