



Pandemic update



Ian Dalton, National Director for NHS Flu Resilience, summarises the latest developments and next steps.

We are beginning to see the weekly numbers of cases decreasing significantly. While it is too early to know whether we have passed the peak of a second wave, this is positive news. However, there are still a relatively high proportion of patients in hospital and critical care, and we are still seeing a number of deaths from swine flu. We are also beginning to see increased pressure within the system, particularly on A&E and ambulance services. The NHS experiences additional pressure on its services each year, but while we are well placed to manage these we cannot be complacent, as we may be facing our toughest winter for many years. All organisations will need to continue to work together to ensure a whole-system approach to managing winter and pandemic flu pressures, responding flexibly to regional and local variation in demand. Only in this way can we continue to maintain services as effectively as possible on behalf of our patients.

Vaccination update

The first phase of delivery of the swine flu vaccination programme has been progressing well and I would like to thank everyone involved for their efforts so far in planning and mobilising this new programme so quickly and effectively. As of 29 November, 275,000 doses have been administered to frontline healthcare workers in England. These uptake figures are encouraging, but there is still more work to be done, and it must continue to remain a priority for all NHS organisations to ensure that all eligible frontline staff are vaccinated.

Completing the vaccination of all of the initial priority groups – public and health and social care staff – remains our highest clinical priority, and it is important that we continue to work to achieve this. Once this is complete however, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) supports our decision to offer the vaccine to all healthy children over six months and under five years of age. Children under five are the age group with the consistently highest levels of hospital admissions. By vaccinating as many children as possible, we will be offering them the best possible protection against the virus.

While we are still to finalise the logistics of how the vaccine will be delivered to this age group, we expect that general practice will want to continue to be a key component in its delivery. We are currently working with the BMA and NHS organisations to agree exactly how this will take place.

We have also taken note of the JCVI advice that the vaccination of main carers of older and disabled people, whose welfare may be at risk if their carer falls ill, should be an important next group. We are therefore discussing how best to implement this advice with carers organisations, to establish a sensible approach before communicating further detail about how the programme will work.

The JCVI has advised that use of the vaccine in the wider healthy population should depend on the evolution of the pandemic as well as new and emerging clinical data on the use of the vaccine. They have also advised us that were the epidemic to wane, this could obviate the need for further vaccination. We will continue to be guided by the most up-to-date scientific advice.

Exercise Peak Practice

We have recently published the national summary report of Exercise Peak Practice. This exercise was the whole system stress test that all 10 SHAs undertook as a key part of the board level assurance process that I asked all NHS trusts to complete by the end of September 2009. The report provides an overview of the ten regional exercises and documents the high-level areas for further action identified by the delegates who attended.

Exercise Peak Practice reaffirmed the extent and depth of planning that had already taken place in the NHS in readiness for a flu pandemic and demonstrated considerable leadership, commitment and planning undertaken by both clinical and managerial staff across the NHS. This planning, together with our vaccination programme and a whole-system response to winter, will put us in the best possible position to respond to the challenges that may lie ahead.

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