

Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride

HSS(MD) 31/2021

For Action:

Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/Health and Social Care Board/HSC Trusts/NIAS
GP Medical Advisers, Health and Social Care Board
All General Practitioners and GP Locums (*for onward distribution to practice staff*)

Please see attached full addressee list

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Your Ref:

Our Ref: HSS (MD) 31/2021

Date: 23 April 2021

Dear Colleague

END OF THE 2020/21 FLU SEASON AND RELATED ISSUES

ACTION REQUIRED

Chief Executives must ensure that this information is drawn to the attention of all staff involved in the seasonal flu vaccination programme. The HSCB must ensure that this information is cascaded to all General Practitioners.

Introduction

1. The purpose of this letter is to draw your attention to the end of the flu season for 2020/21 and a number of related issues.
2. Last year saw the roll out of the biggest influenza vaccination programme ever in Northern Ireland, with the aim of offering protection to as many eligible people as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic. We would like to extend a huge thank you to all those involved for all your hard work which, despite the challenges of delivering a programme during the COVID-19 pandemic, led to improved vaccine uptake rates compared to previous years and the most vaccine doses delivered during a flu season to date.
3. I want to specifically acknowledge all those involved in the planning and delivery of the Seasonal Flu Vaccination Programme, including the Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service, PHA, HSCB, HSC trusts, NIAS, community pharmacies and GPs and their staff, all of whom

contributed to the success of the Flu Vaccination Programme – some with an increasing cohort of patients whilst adhering to social distancing. I also wish to convey my sincere thanks to the many clinical, managerial and other staff throughout the HSC all of whom responded so admirably and professionally throughout the winter, and so minimised any potential impact on patients and clients.

4. As a result of non-pharmaceutical interventions in place for COVID-19 (such as wearing of face covering, physical and social distancing, and restricted international travel) influenza activity levels were extremely low globally in 2020/21. This winter we need to be prepared for higher levels of flu and the possibility that it could be a bad flu year, with more of the population susceptible to influenza given the low levels last season. I appreciate that as a result of issues beyond the control of the Department the school vaccination programme was further complicated by the closure of schools due to the pandemic and I recognise the considerable effort required to rearrange school visits and maintain an extremely impressive uptake rate.

Surveillance

5. The Public Health Agency's regular flu bulletin is the definitive source of public health surveillance information on flu activity for Northern Ireland throughout the season. The surveillance of seasonal flu depends on accurate, timely data produced by GP sentinel practices, the labs and collated by the PHA flu team to produce the bulletin which enables us to follow the course of the flu season and respond accordingly. I would like to thank all those involved in the production of this information.

Use of Antiviral Medicines

6. The Public Health Agency surveillance data reported in the flu bulletin confirms that the circulation of flu virus in the community has remained at baseline levels. This means that:
 - GPs and other prescribers working in primary care should not prescribe antivirals for the prevention or treatment of influenza on a HS21 prescription form;
 - Community pharmacists should no longer supply antiviral medicines in primary care on presentation of a HS21 prescription form.

This advice does not impact on prescribing of antivirals in hospitals.

7. Flu vaccine is therefore not required for pregnant women or any other population group from this point onwards and over the summer in 2021 but

GPs can still phone on a case to case basis to Movianto to request the flu vaccine if they feel it is indicated.

Vaccine uptake rates

8. The final flu update data shows that 79.1% of those aged 65 years and over received the seasonal influenza vaccine while the uptake in those aged under 65 in an at-risk group was 67.8%. This compares with 74.8% uptake in the over 65s, and 58.9% in the under 65 at-risk group at the end of season last year.
9. For the children's programme, an uptake rate of 55.2% for those aged 2 to 4 years of age was achieved while for all children attending primary 1 to primary 7 an uptake rate of 73.2% was achieved. This compares with 48.5% and 75.4% respectively achieved for both groups at the end of March last year. For the first time Year 8s in secondary schools were offered the vaccine and 66.6% of those pupils received the vaccine.
10. By the end of February 52.4% of all Trust employed front-line Health Care workers had by vaccinated which is an increase of 11.2% from last year while 40.8% of Trust employed frontline social care workers had been vaccinated, an increase of 18% from last year.
11. While this increase is to be commended, I would urge you to repeat the commitment and resolve put into the staff vaccination programmes during 2020/21 in future years. It is very important that we see further increases in staff take-up to protect themselves, their families and their patients. This is more important than ever as we see the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and given the potential for further waves of COVID-19 later in the year. A high flu vaccine uptake rate by staff will help maintain service capacity during a period of high demand.
12. For 2021/22 the two separate targets for frontline health care staff and frontline social care staff will continue.
 - For frontline health care staff each Trust should achieve **at least a 75% uptake rate.**
 - For frontline social care staff each Trust should achieve **at least a 75% uptake rate.**

Critical Care

13. As flu levels were extremely low this season, to date there has only been 1 admission to ICU with confirmed influenza. Staff in critical care are to be commended for their ongoing work and the robust escalation plans that remain in place should these be required.

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE 2021/22 FLU SEASON

Seasonal Flu Vaccination Programme 2021/22

14. Department of Health officials are starting to work with colleagues in the HSC to update the management of seasonal flu plan for 2021/22. While the HSC coped well with the flu season for 2020/21 and the challenges it posed, given that Covid-19 may be with us for some time, we need to ensure that the entire Service is ready to cope in the coming flu season.
15. The expanded flu vaccination programme that we had last year will continue in 2021/22 as part of our wider planning for winter when we are likely to see both flu and COVID-19 in circulation. This means that the offer for 50 to 64 year olds will continue this year to protect this age group, as hospitalisation from COVID-19 increases from the age of 50 years onwards. People in this age group will be offered the flu vaccine from the start of the vaccination period and not have to wait until later in the season to be offered vaccine.
16. The programme will also be extended this year to secondary school. Vaccinating children reduces transmission of influenza and JCVI have recommended that expanding into secondary schools would be cost-effective, particularly if COVID-19 is still a problem. The year groups to be vaccinated in secondary school are yet to be confirmed.
17. All of the target groups for the flu vaccination programme during 2021/22 will be confirmed in the HSS seasonal flu policy letter which will be issued as soon as possible.
18. The Influenza Green Book chapter can be viewed at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/influenza-the-green-book-chapter-19>

Seasonal flu vaccine supplies

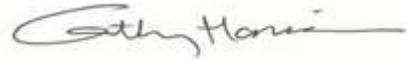
19. The process to centrally purchase seasonal influenza vaccines for the 2021/22 season is ongoing. In line with the latest Green Book advice, a cell based quadrivalent vaccine will be available for all 'at risk' patients under 65 years of age while an adjuvanted quadrivalent vaccine has been procured for those aged 65 years and over. The new quadrivalent vaccine is specifically designed to protect adults aged 65 and over against four strains of seasonal influenza.
20. We are acutely aware of the pressures right across the HSC system at present as result of the Covid-19 pandemic. However it is more important than ever that the Department, PHA, HSC organisations, GPs and primary teams and Community Pharmacy build on the experiences gained from

previous year's vaccination programmes in order to continue to deliver an effective high quality service to protect the health of the people of Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely



Michael McBride
Chief Medical Officer



Cathy Harrison
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer

CIRCULATION LIST

Director of Public Health/Executive Medical Director, Public Health Agency
(for onward distribution to all relevant health protection staff)
Assistant Director Public Health (Health Protection), Public Health Agency
Director of Nursing, Public Health Agency
Assistant Director of Pharmacy and Medicines Management, Health and Social Care Board, *(for onward distribution to all Community Pharmacies)*
Directors of Pharmacy HSC Trusts
Director of Social Care and Children, HSCB
Family Practitioner Service Leads, Health and Social Care Board *(for cascade to GP Out of Hours services)*
Medical Directors, HSC Trusts *(for onward distribution to all Consultant Obstetricians, Paediatricians and other relevant staff)*
Directors of Nursing, HSC Trusts *(for onward distribution to all Community Nurses, and Midwives)*
Directors of Children's Services, HSC Trusts
RQIA *(for onward transmission to all independent providers including independent hospitals)*
Regional Medicines Information Service, Belfast HSC Trust
Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service, Northern HSC Trust
University Health Contacts

This letter is available on the Department of Health website at
<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/professional-medical-and-environmental-health-advice/hssmd-letters-and-urgent-communications>